

**EPISODE 172**

**JW:** *"I was literally training with guys that were on my wall. Their poster was on my wall whenever I was a kid. Now, they're my teammates, and they're Hall of Famers, and they're my coaches. And I can't show up because when I'm going through withdrawal, if I tried to not be on it, so now I'm having to train high. Yes, after my fights, it was like full bore addiction. At first, I could sober up for eight weeks before the fight, and then sober up for three weeks before the fight, and then sober up three days before the fight. Then like, I'm using the night before the fight, and then it's like, 'Oh, man. I'm starting withdrawals this early right after I stopped, I better take something today.' Day of the fight – it was hard because I was winning, and I even left the sport on – it wasn't a big win streak. It was like a three-fight winning streak. Everyone's like, 'What are you doing?' Joe was one of those. 'What are you doing? Why are you walking away from the sport? Sky's the limit. You can have another decade, two decades to fight.' But I wanted to get my life right, and I just found out like I was fighting against people, but really, I was supposed to be fighting for people."*

**[INTRODUCTION]**

**[0:01:03] LW:** Hey, friend. Welcome back to The Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary folks just like you and me who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified with as their mission. 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've directly benefited from their work.

This week on the podcast, I am honored to be in conversation with The Big Pigmy, also known as former UFC fighter turned Fight for the Forgotten founder and humanitarian, Justin Wren. Justin was bullied as a child, and that is what initially got him interested in the sport of wrestling. He went on to become a 10-time state wrestling champion in Texas, and then in 2005, he won a National Wrestling Championship. That led to a career in the UFC in 2006, where Justin had an overall record of 15 wins and two losses.

Then at 23 years old, Justin stepped away from that sport because he was battling with pain killing addiction. And that's when he started volunteering at a children's hospital, which then helped to inspire a greater sense of purpose in his life. He had a vision about a tribe of people that he was meant to work with. Then through this incredible string of serendipitous moments, Justin found himself on a flight to Africa to the Congo, where he first encountered the Pygmy tribe that was in his vision. He ended up helping them to install a water well.

Then he started returning back to the Congo to work with them some more, and he would go back several times, building homes, installing multiple wells. He would overcome malaria three times, parasites several times, and even something called Blackwater fever. That's how he went on to create the nonprofit Fight for the Forgotten, as well as his popular podcast, Overcome with Justin Wren, which focuses on overcoming childhood trauma to find your purpose.

As you can imagine from hearing all of those twists and turns in his story, Justin is quite the storyteller, and his life has been full of incredible ups and downs. That's probably why Justin has been invited onto the Joe Rogan podcast about a dozen times. The guy is deep, and he's soulful, and he just tells wonderful stories. Many of which he will share with us in this interview. So I can't wait for you to hear The Big Pygmy's full backstory, in his own words. Without further ado, let's get into it with Mr. Justin Wren, the founder of Fight for the Forgotten.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:04:02] LW:** Justin Wren, thank you for coming on to the podcast, sir.

**[0:04:06] JW:** Yes, absolutely. I love getting to know you. I love the best because I know who you are, so I really appreciate this opportunity to go even deeper with you.

**[0:04:14] LW:** I was doing some research and I saw you've been on Joe Rogan multiple. How many times you've been on Joe Rogan?

**[0:04:20] JW:** The next time would be my 10th time. So yes.

**[0:04:21] LW:** Oh my God. So you're like a regular there. That's crazy.

**[0:04:26] JW:** Pretty much every year since I've been on, I go on. We connected obviously because he commentated a couple of my fights. But once he heard that I was doing some humanitarian work, and then you heard where I was doing it, he was like, "What are you doing there?" It's a dangerous place in the world, but it's got some of the most brilliant beautiful, incredible people in the world. So I connected with them. Then he's like, "Could you come tell the story?" So I did, and then it went everywhere. It went to the Today Show. I was on TMZ right after Lindsay Lohan, right before Honey BooBoo. Really good company, I guess, and I just took off.

So I'm really, really grateful for him because he has this kind of Midas touch, or like what he touches turns to gold in certain sense. He loves to share that with his friends, and people he believes in, in companies, in causes. So he's been our biggest supporter, at least raising awareness, and I would say, even like fundraising and donating. So it's funny, I think after one of the podcasts, we had donors from all 50 states, and more than 60 countries. So that was just like, "Whoa. This show is going crazy." That's been the journey to be able to document it on that show.

**[0:05:40] LW:** Any challenges to being on Joe Rogan 10 times? Like anything that's difficult about that?

**[0:05:45] JW:** The last time, yes. The last time, there was. There was other stuff that happened. One of the people inside studio, actually two of them tested positive. I haven't really talked about this, but they tested positive for COVID. So it threw off the show a little bit, we got started late. And Joe was so nice, though. He's like, "Hey, his wife's name, is going to bring you a care package, and we're going to make sure you get taken care of." So, such a kind, compassionate guy. But then whenever we got started, I just felt like, okay, times compressed. I told Joe I had a story I never shared before.

I almost use that as an excuse to not lean in, and share what I came there to share, and it was about my suicide attempt. I had never shared that story, at least not publicly. But all of a sudden, in my mind, it was like, "Wait. How do I go to the highlight reel? How do I share another story of good stuff, and interesting stuff, and not this hard thing? Because all of a sudden, I got cold feet.

I was like, you know what, what am I doing thinking I'm going to share this story. Whenever normally, I come on here, I share the good things, and we get donations. Now, a nonprofit founder, president, CEO, and I'm going to talk about the lowest point of my life. Is that going to lose trust, or people that have donated in the past going to be like mad that they did? All these insecurities and self-doubt, just like came rushing in to where I really beat around the bush for probably an hour or more. It shows like, try to love me softballs. I'll just not do it. And he finally goes, "Would you come here man to share?" and something like that. And I was just like, "Ugh."

Then I just had this thought, if it just helps one person, do it. And so I did, and afterwards, I felt like, man, I bombed because I didn't share really much of anything for a year. I was just almost interviewing him asking him questions. That day, I got a message but didn't see it for months later. Then, I was at the Conor McGregor, Dustin Poirier fight. They were raising funds for Fight for the Forgotten. Dustin Poirier was. I went on Instagram Live, and all of a sudden, all the comments just started saying, "Go read this message. Go read this message. Go read this message. Scroll up." So I did.

There was a guy that said, "Hey, on January 27, on your last appearance on Rogan, I just got out of ICU. I was in New York, and I was walking to the Brooklyn Bridge to jump off of it. Because of your story, I decided not to." While he was on the Brooklyn Bridge. So I was just like, "Well, that's my one." Sometimes you don't know the full effect. Then months later – I've never shared the story, by the way.

Months later, I was at Onnit. Joe's owner of that and I'm one of the Onnit pros, and so I'm working out there, doing strengthening and conditioning. I'm buzzing out right after the workout to go to jujitsu. I get to the door, and I hear footsteps running up on me. I turn around, and get this big, sweaty hug. The guy goes, "I'm the guy. I'm the guy." I was, "Hey, buddy. You're the guy. Help me out. What's that mean?" And he goes, "Brooklyn Bridge." I was just like, "Whoa." So I pulled him in even tighter for a deeper or better hug, and we took a picture together.

So this is part of his story, was, he worked on Wall Street, COVID happened. His fiancée was stuck in Europe. They're separated, her dad dies, can't come home, and see him. So he gets laid off, then he relapses, then he's – from Wall Street to homeless in Harlem, to then he got jumped by seven guys. The seven guys hit him with baseball bats, and something around the

teeth. He lost or damaged 19 teeth. When he got out of ICU, he was there in ICU for nine days or something like that. When he got out, he just started walking into Brooklyn Bridge to jump. We took a picture together.

The next day, I'm going to share my story at a treatment facility or rehab. And I get a message from this guy, Chris. And Chris says, "Hey, man. Can you send me the picture we took?" I grabbed his hand, and I raised it like a fighter, the champ of a fight, and the referee holding the hand up. "Yes, man. I'll send it to you." Send it to him, he goes, "Oh, man. I'm ashamed of my teeth." He actually hadn't told me the full story yet. I was like, "Oh, I didn't even notice your teeth."

Then he messages me – I will sum the story up this way. I share my story at the treatment facility. The treatment facility had just had this person in there talking about synchronicity, and the day before talking about vulnerability. So I got vulnerable. I'm sharing my story, one of the kids, he's like 19 years old, he's the youngest one there at rehab. He says, "Hey, yesterday we learned about vulnerability and today we learned about synchronicity. I've always wanted to be an MMA fighter. That's what you do. So I'm getting vulnerable and sharing that this seems pretty like synchronistic that you're here right now." I was like, "Man, that's incredible." I go, "Can I get vulnerable with you, and tell you about synchronicity, and what happened to me yesterday?" So I share a little bit, share the picture. I'm going to share teeth – he's got his life. He can be grateful for the breath in his lungs, and the beating heart in his chest, and he's alive.

I think I even message that to Chris. I'm like, "Teeth can change. We can get those fixed, like something will happen." I started walking out to my car, there was a videographer there that was for the treatment facility. I get to my door, and I hear footsteps running up on me. I turn around. Guy says, "Hang on real quick. Can I get vulnerable with you and talk to you about synchronicity?" I'm like, "Yeah, okay." He said, "Yesterday, I was hired by a dentist. It's Austin's best dentist, and he wants to start a charity to restore people's smiles. He asked me to find the first guy. I think it might be this guy, Chris. Would you go meet with a dentist with me?" I go, "Yes, let's go right now" and so we did.

The dentist was like 3000 five-star reviews. He did Hollywood teeth and all that stuff. The next week, we go to the same workout. The dentist was a triathlete. so I bring my friend that's an

athlete to the workout. It's Chris, me, and the dentist, Dave, all three together. Everybody knows what's happening, he doesn't. But he's holding the dentist's feet while he's doing pushups, and they're doing these workouts together. They're like spotting each other. When at the end, they asked me to speak and let some cameras there because they said it was for my comeback fight. It was really just for him to like remember this moment. So he's mic'd up, and stuff. I share my story. I'm like, "Chris, you want to share anything?" He comes up and shares, he smiles at everyone. Says, "I hated not having masks because of my smile. I could cover my smile with mask." He goes, "But I'm going to smile at y'all now" and he smiled. Then I'm like, "Hey, Dave. We worked out together. Did you notice anything about Chris or do you want to say anything?" He comes up in surprises him, and says, "We're giving you new teeth today."

So everyone celebrates, hoist him over our shoulders. Then, yes, literally, the dentist cleared his schedule for three days. He's the only dentist in Texas that has the mills that make individual teeth, and he had five of them. So he could be making five teeth at once for implants. He got \$100,000 smile in like three days, which was insane. So the story goes on. I'll actually show you this picture.

What's insane about it is I get invited up to New York for Teddy Atlas', he's a boxing coach and commentator to his podcast. So we go and I say, "Hey, can I bring a friend with me?" He goes, "Yes." Chris comes with me to New York, and I said, "We're going to go take back that ground man." I actually asked him first what the Brooklyn Bridge used to mean to you. He goes, "Oh, it's iconic. It's a symbol of New York. It's like who we are. It used to be something I was so proud of as a New Yorker." And what does it mean to you now? He goes, "The darkest moment of my life. I think if I was ever up there again, I'd be trembling. Because I stood on that bridge for over an hour listening to your story. It was January, I went there in shorts, and a t-shirt, and there was snow on the ground. Because I wanted to – if I jumped, and the fall didn't kill me, I wanted the cold to kill me." He goes, "So I stood there shivering." He goes, "I'll probably tremble standing up there now." I was like, "Well, we need to go take back that ground, man."

Real quick, I'm going to show you this. That was his smile. Then three days later.

**[0:13:47] LW:** Oh my God. Wow.

**[0:13:48] JW:** That's three days.

**[0:13:50] LW:** That's insane.

**[0:13:51] JW:** It was 20 hours of dental work. He cleared his whole schedule, had all his team there. It was like a NASCAR pit crew, like working on him. It was truly one of the coolest moments of my life, because that's the guy I shared it for. So we go back to the Brooklyn Bridge, we take a picture, like our first picture where I'm raising his hand. I know, Chris, let me share a story. But there's a third gentleman here, and I just won't say his name yet, but we're friends now. But I just haven't asked him permission. But we're on the bridge, and I raise Chris' hand and we take a picture. This guy grabs Chris, and says, "Hey, is that Justin Wren from Rogan's podcast?" He's like, "Yeah, it is." He goes, "I told myself if I ever saw him, I tell him a story."

So Chris brought me over. He said, "Hey, on January 27<sup>th</sup>, I was in Mexico, the same town you were in. I had all the drugs and I was ready to kill myself. But I got a notification on my phone, Joe Rogan dropped a new episode and I decided to listen. Because of your story, I didn't do it. I flushed it, and then I decided to live." I was like, "Whoa." Then Chris grabs him by the shoulders, and then starts pointing to the ground, and goes, "I was standing right here at the same moment." Then all of us meet on the Brooklyn Bridge where it happened, just insane. We were like delayed that day. We're supposed to be there earlier. We ended up getting there later. All of those, being vulnerable, synchronicity, that was one of the coolest moments has ever come from that podcast.

**[0:15:19] LW:** I have another question about this moment. What are the circumstances that you get invited to Joe's podcast? Does he text you, you text him? Was that like a plan thing, months in advance? Was it a last-minute thing?

**[0:15:30] JW:** That, when I texted him about a week before, and said, "Hey, Joe. I have a story I've never shared, but I like to." He goes, "Come on. Let's do it next week."

**[0:15:39] LW:** He didn't even ask what the story was about?

**[0:15:41] JW:** No, I think it's because I've been on there plenty of time. It was – the first time he invited me on, and then pretty much the other times, it's like, he'll text me a week or two in advance saying, "Hey, what are you doing? You're want to come to LA?" Or now, we're both in Austin, so he'll text me or I'll text him, and we'll be at a comedy thing or an event. He's like, "You want to do it again?" I'm like, "Yes, sure. Let's go."

**[0:16:03] LW:** What inspired you to text him that time to say, "Hey, I want to come on and share story"?

**[0:16:07] JW:** Yes, yes, good question. I think I'd really started reflecting and meditating as actual practice. I had gone through some tough stuff. I mean, I've been to treatment twice. I've attempted suicide twice. I think it being feeling like it's a secret, or feeling like I have a story that I could share that would help people potentially in their darkest moments, and yet, I'm not doing it. Or I do it in a reserved sense, and don't just lay it all out there. Or I think I needed to do it for me more than anyone else, almost. But I knew, or I hoped that something like this would happen too. I didn't know it'd be this. I couldn't have dream this. But I get a few messages like, "Hey, man. That really encouraged me." But yes, I think I needed to do it for me."

Now, I think even – I haven't listened back to it, because I've been petrified of that one. But I think I now can share it and even more authentic way. Because after the moments with Chris, and this other guy on the bridge, and even my last speaking engagement, man, I was there. We got to honor a guy. I had taken some pictures of us at an event all together, the attendees. I put this guy in a slide because there's this awesome picture of him doing some volunteer work. He came up right before and I'm like, "Hey, can I use this picture in my slide deck?" He goes, "Yes, absolutely. Because man, I've been waiting to tell you something." I was like, "What's that?" He goes, "Man, on January 27<sup>th</sup>, you went on Rogan's, and I was in a suicidal place, and I was seriously contemplating it. But because of that story, I decided not to do it." I was like, "Wait, what?"

So I moved to this picture from like one of the first slides to like right after Chris. I was like, I share this story, and I met the one I did it for, and then I met the second. And actually, someone with us in the audience is a third, and asked him to stand up, and he got a standing ovation. Like people just loving on him. He's messaged me since and he's got a bunch of friends from



that conference and stuff. But yes, I think then I was scared. So I shared it, and maybe out of being scared, and sharing it anyways, like it resonated with people. But now I'm not as scared or timid at all to share. I think as you share, and go deeper, or get more vulnerable, it allows you to lean in even more, if that makes sense.

**[0:18:28] LW:** You remember which episode it would have been on Joe Rogan? Which number? I know you probably don't know the exact number.

**[0:18:35] JW:** I think it was 2021.

**[0:18:38] LW:** I see one with 2021, February 2<sup>nd</sup>. Do you remember the month?

**[0:18:43] JW:** Maybe that's what it was.

**[0:18:45] LW:** There's one about your sobriety journey.

**[0:18:47] JW:** Yes. Yes, yes.

**[0:18:48] LW:** Is that it?

**[0:18:50] JW:** Yes. Oh, is that the YouTube? The clips come out –

**[0:18:52] LW:** No, no. Yes, that's right. That's a clip. That's a clip, but that's the story then on that clip. I just want to link to it on the podcast so that people can listen to it, since we've talked it up so much.

**[0:19:02] JW:** Yes.

**[0:19:05] LW:** So let's go back and just fill in the early days, childhood. You said you grew up in a loving family. So give us the sort of superhero origin story of how you grew up. What was the vibe like, what sort of ideologies, and philosophies did you learn from your parents, or caregivers that helped to shape your path as an adult?

**[0:19:28] JW:** I would say that I had the most positive mom, I could ever – I was texting her before, and I her saved on my phone as best mom ever still since I – saved her that way since I was 16. She was a champion athlete. She was a three-time national champion, two times in barrel racing for horses, and one time in tennis. So she was an athlete. My dad was a sports photographer. So I kind of didn't have an option, but to be an athlete. I would say that homework Life was fairly good. My mom, for sure. Dad, it was tough. He was bipolar and abusive. I could be the best guy, most charismatic, kindest, and then just switch on a dime. So that was tough. Or in sports, like my mom's the athlete, but my dad would be the one that's getting kicked out of baseball, or football, or basketball, I think even a soccer game because he's yelling with coaches, and parents, and referees.

So then at school, it was really hard because I moved schools in third grade. It's a little country town outside of Fort Worth, Texas. From third grade to eighth grade, I got really heavily bullied. When I say really heavily bullied, I mean, like drastically, like in front of the whole school moments, like being in the showers, and waiting to be the last one in the shower, because I'm so cautious because I was heavy set. To where then they take all my clothes and throw them under the bleachers during the volleyball game, it's all girls. Then I have nothing, they took all the towels out, and there's just a little hand towel. That's a minor moment. I don't know why I brought that one up.

But there was a moment where I went to school, and I got an invitation for a birthday party. I couldn't believe I got it, and there was a costume contest. Winner was going to get a prize. On the invitation was a Dr. Pepper gumball machine was like the prize, with Dr. Pepper flavored gumballs. Her dad worked there, she was my biggest crush of high school. People were talking about going as Thor, or whatever, and I probably should have gone as Thor. But I decided to go as a transformer, and her favorite was Optimus Prime. So she liked transformers, and I knew that about her. So while people are talking about Marvel, or whatever, I'm thinking like, "I'm going to go with her favorite character, Optimus Prime, but I'm going to transform with like – it was around the Superbowl time. So there's like the guys in the Heisman pose, but it's like Dr. Pepper cans or something like that or the boxes. So inspired me to go as a Dr. Pepper transformer, Dr. Optimus Pepper, I guess.

My mom with some duct tape helped me put a 24 pack on my hat, and 12 packs on my arm. I made a chest plate, and a sword, and a shield, and I went to her party. Her name was Jennifer. We get there, a grandmother opens the door. I was like, "Oh my gosh. Jennifer is going to love this." So I go to the backyard. Rumors at school were true. There was a Dr. Pepper machine in their house, there was like vintage signs around. Like some reason in Texas, Dr. Peppers huge, kind of in the culture, at least for like high school and middle school.

So I go to the backyard when the door opened, I was hit with a bunch of flashes of light. And my eyes are adjusting, but I'm hearing the sounds of laughter, and I look out, nobody is dressed up. It's only me. Jennifer said, "I can't believe you thought you're good enough to come to my party." Next to her, Tyler said, "He's got a cool turnaround story now." Hurt people, hurt people." He said, "You're worthless." And then my notorious middle school bully, but started in third grade all the way to eighth grade, he's been out of trouble, and other things. But he said, "You should just kill yourself."

So at 13, certainly the biggest battle of my life, which was against depression, suicide, which later turned into addiction to try to drown out those voices in my head. That was really just them on repeat. It was them that then became my own self-talk, playing back to me anytime I didn't do something, I guess perfect, or great, or anytime there's like a small stumble, or failure, or feeling of inadequacy as, "You're not good enough. You're worthless. Maybe you should just kill yourself."

So about two months after that, right before the end of school, I went to like this flea market, they were selling flying squirrels, and iguanas, and all sorts of weird stuff. But I found at the same store where they sold the UFC VHS tapes. So I walk into the store, they sell BB guns, other things. I was actually going for a pellet gun for the rats in our barn to like try to help clear those up, with horses, and stuff. They get there, and I see UFC 2 through 11, I think. It was missing number one. I just spent all my allowance on that. Because when I picked it up, I was like, "These guys don't get bullied." Then I turned it over, and I'm seeing – I mean, I was into like Chuck Norris, and Bruce Lee, and different stuff like that. So I see a sumo wrestler versus like a boxer, and a jujitsu guy versus a kickboxer, and kind of started fall in love with it before I ever watched it. I was like, "Oh my gosh." I'm mesmerized by it.

**[0:24:30] LW:** Sounds like the real-life Karate Kid story, the MMA version of it. Anyway, go ahead.

**[0:24:35] JW:** Yes. No, thanks. What's wild is, I shared I would look at Chuck Norris and Bruce Lee. Recently, I was put in the – well, it was over a year ago, inducted in the black belt magazine Hall of Fame. I was on the cover, and like I used to buy that when I was 13, 14 years old.

**[0:24:51] LW:** Oh my God.

**[0:24:52] JW:** Really surreal moment for me. In it, it's about bullying prevention, and the work in Africa. At that moment, I decided I was going to do it before I ever had any martial arts background. I would hide the VHS tapes under my bed, and watch them, and then when my dad found the stack, he thought it was like – I'm 13 years old, he thought it was porn. But it was just the UFC. I think he had a worse reaction to that, like, "Terry." It's my mom. "He's going to try to do this someday." She's like, "No, we won't." I'm just like, "No, I won't. Maybe I will." We got into wrestling, and then I became a state champion, all-American national champion.

**[0:25:43] LW:** Talk a little bit about how you got into wrestling. I don't know if you were at this high school that's known for wrestling. Or if you went to this school, because they were known for wrestling, and you're already interested in wrestling, and you had these two amazing coaches. What were the circumstances of that?

**[0:25:55] JW:** Yes, two Olympic gold medalists as my high school coaches. So my first year, year and a half of wrestling, I only won one match by one point. My dad had come off the mats and says, "You should –" I go, "I should have what?" He says he didn't know anything about wrestling. He couldn't tell me anything, so it was my sport. It was my sport. My freshman year, I was getting bullied, even in high school, because I was – I don't like to use the word, but they're yelling slurs, they would say, "You're gay" or "You're fag because you're wearing a singlet, and you're touching boys" or whatever. I didn't have a coach. I didn't have a coach.

So my parents decided, and they saw my passion for it. So they sent me 67 miles. So I'm in Southwest Fort Worth having to go to like east of Dallas, the high school, because there's two

Olympic gold medalists as my high school coaches. So it was really neat, because I say they're really my first coaches, because I was at a school where there wasn't any wrestling. So my parents decided to sacrifice to send me 67 miles of school, and I'd have to leave before the sun was up, and come down after the sun was down. They just took an interest in me because they're like, "Wait, what? What's this kid doing? He doesn't know anything. And yet, he's going to sacrifice like this to be part of the team."

**[0:27:11] LW:** Did they know about the bullying?

**[0:27:12] JW:** They pulled it out of me probably a year after I started with them, because they're like, "Hey, what's going on? You're doing all this stuff to be a good wrestler. But when you're out there, you're timid, you're hesitating, you're telegraphing every move that you do, because you don't believe in it. Why are you timid? Why don't you just go? I'm like, "I don't know, I'm scared, I'm nervous. I know y'all are great, but I don't have confidence in myself." Like, "Why?" "Well, I've just grown up getting bullied, and I don't know. And they're like, "Hey, we got to change that whole mindset around."

That's whenever Kenny Monday really leaned in. He's the first African-American to win the Olympic gold in wrestling. He's been in my corner for more than half my fights, and he's been coaching me since I was 16 years old, maybe 15. He's an incredible man. So he's been my coach for 20 years, that's a while. He's like, "Hey, I'm going to train with you more." So he just invested into my life even more to where, now, he's not just my coach, but he's my training partner. So you unlearn any of the bad habits that you've started, or since I was starting with them really early on.

Now, I don't have the opportunity to learn bad habits. And one of the things he said was – when I came in there, all these guys had wrestled since they were kids, because they were in their kids' program. They can learn all the different moves, because they have this big depth of – a wealth of knowledge. But me coming in at it late, they're like, instead of trying 100 moves, drilling them 10 or 100 times. We're going to teach you two moves. Two moves, and you will have a third in your back pocket. But the two moves, we're going to teach you. It doesn't matter if your opponents know it's coming, you're still going to get it, because you're going to be that proficient and that you've done it 10,000 times. You've done it 100,000 times."

That's still the case now, I've got plenty of takedowns now, but there's two that people just don't want me to get, and then I have one in my back pocket. Where if I do this one, and it doesn't work, it's a lateral drop, then I go to a belly to back suplex. If that doesn't work out, I'll have it for headlock or take down to the legs. So it's been pretty unique, because there's an Olympic gold medalist with one move, but no one can stop it. They just helped me develop this confidence where at one tournament, we're in Oklahoma, it was called Southern Plains. I haven't been winning anything, and they're like, "Just hit it. Just hit it. If you miss, you're going to get pinned. But guess what, you're getting pinned anyways. So if you get it, you're going to pin them." And so I pinned my way through the finals, where I just put every guy in there back, held on for dear life, and then everything changed.

**[0:29:47] LW:** Was that your *Karate Kid* moment where you – and the kick.

**[0:29:49] JW:** That was. Yes, it was. Because I was from Texas. Yes, I had the best of my corner, but everyone knew I was kind of grim. I was just getting my wrestling legs under me. But yeah, I was wrestling kids from Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas. I think Ohio was there. People have done it their whole lives. It's a regional tournament that sends you to Nationals. Now, all of a sudden, I had my ticket to the national tournament.

**[0:30:15] LW:** So you've been diagnosed with ADHD and depression at 13? Did you find that the wrestling helped the –?

**[0:30:23] JW:** That's right, to concentrate. I've heard this quote, or someone speaking about it, basically, we're not taught how to concentrate. Then, we're never given any tools, techniques around it. For me, fighting in martial arts and wrestling, you have to be fully present. There's been times in my professional career that I'm going with guys that maybe are learning, or it's a hobby, or they're doing it competitively, but not professionally. I can go into those practices, and if I'm not fully present, if I'm thinking about something else, now I have a nonprofit. If I'm thinking about that stuff, all of a sudden, a guy gets something on me that he should have never gotten because my mind is not there. So I've had to refocus anytime I go to the match. Like leave work out the door, I'm here to work now, be present.

But whenever I was starting out, it was like, it was wild. Because there's never a moment you're more present than whenever someone's trying to take you down and put you on your back, or punch you in the face. So you're not in regret of the past. You're not [inaudible 0:31:28]. You're just here right now. Here, now.

**[0:31:33] LW:** What does it take physically to be a champion wrestler? Because a lot of guys are wrestling out there, but you really excelled, and you won a bunch of titles, and 10 times state champion and all this. What made you different. I know you wrote things down. I want to talk about that too. But just when you're out there, from a technical perspective, I know with MMA, it's about conditioning, and all of that. But what about at the high school level?

**[0:31:58] JW:** I would say this, maybe it's one of those surprising truths you could hear about. I think to the casual eye, or the casual fan, or the untrained eye, it's the person with the strongest muscles, or the best cardio, strongest physique that wins. But I truly believe it's the person with the strongest reasons who wins. Why are you out there? Why do you fight? Who do you fight for. On the wrestling mat, it's like, that was my only thing that I had. I was putting my identity in it. I was like, if I could transform into this, I won't be that anymore. So I think it was probably at a more unhealthy place, or immature place then. But I would say that it's the person with the most reasons that usually wins in the strongest reasons. We can strengthen our reasons, and we can stack our reasons, and stack the deck in our favor.

So I would stack my reasons by, no one's going to work as hard as me. No one's going to – I show up early, I stay late, I ask questions. I'm going to be the most coachable person in the room. I've got a lot of catching up to do. There's three wrestling styles, but there's one main season that people would wrestle in. But here's the other two styles that people were kind of not forgetting about. But I was just – I didn't have an offseason. So my high school career, I might have started in high school. But I caught up with all those guys, wrestled when they're seven, eight, nine years old, because I was doing three seasons in one year.

So four times three, I mean, I got 12 wrestling seasons in my high school career. Then, I think being super coachable, and being able to listen, I was trained on that by Olympic gold medalist. You got to listen to us while you're out there, because they can show you something that you don't see coming. And you got to be fully present, but you got to be open to like new ideas, and

strategies, and be reminded of the game plan for victory. If I'm deterring from that, I got to hear it. If I'm being set up for something I'm not seeing, you got to hear what my blind spot is, and be able to adjust, and recalibrate, and stay focused.

For me, in wrestling, it's such a hardnosed sport, that you have to be willing to take someone that deeper waters than they're willing to go, and you got to be willing to go deeper. But wrestling jujitsu, it's all about being comfortable being uncomfortable. So I ice bath every single day. Now, ice bath is the best thing I've done as daily practice for my mental health, and I like stack that with meditation, and breath work, and stuff.

I went all the different places there, but as a wrestler, I think it's the one that has the strongest reasons, and that is willing to go further than the other person. So you always are ready to battle, and so anytime you're put in a position that's compromising some guys are – they're just willing to give it up, and try to get back up, and then rework. It's like, no, you never give them an inch. If you give them an inch, you got to take back to you. And yeah, just not quit. You got to make him quit.

**[0:34:54] LW:** What was your idea of success at that time in your life when you project it into the future, that's a champion wrestler.

**[0:35:01] JW:** Yes. So on the go, my coaches said, write down state champion, put it somewhere you can see it. And we promise you, by the time you're senior, you'll be a state champ. So I went home, and I wrote down national champ. My mom was a national champ, so I was like, "I'm going to write down national champ." I put it above my bed, and I put it on my mirror. So that way, when I'm brushing my teeth in the morning, I'm already thinking about it. When I'm going to sleep at night, I'm literally trying to dream about it. So they asked us, "Who did it?" I think some of the guys did it, but I really went for it. Then, I asked coach, "Is there anything else I can do?" He's like, "Put the two moves you want, like on the left, and on the right.

One was a lateral drop from a wrestling magazine, and I put it on the left. Then I Googled one, a famous photo, and I put it on the right, and there's a belly to back suplex. Those are my two moves I picked. My first national championship I won was at the move on the left. My second



national championship I won was at the move on the right. For me, that was my only definition of success was being a national champ, and then being an MMA fighter.

When wrestling and fighting was almost taken away from me with an injury, and I have a scar on my elbow. I mean, we started watching *Painkiller* yesterday on Netflix. Oh my gosh. It made me so mad, because I was part of that. I had numerous doctors that would give me 60, 90, 120 oxy, because I broke and dislocated my elbow, and I had to have a reconstructive surgery. And they said, I only at a 30% chance to ever compete again. Here's these doctors given me all that stuff, saying it's not addictive. Less than 1% of people get addicted to it, and it's the safest one there is.

So I started my MMA career as an addict to oxy. But I chose to jump in MMA at 19 years old, because I was living at the Olympic Training Center, broke my arm wrestling, an Olympic bronze medalist, and a world champion. It was a freak accident in a match. I was down by a point, I didn't want to give up another point. So we went out of bounds, and whenever we hit, right off the wrestling mat, there was like that rubber when you're lifting weights and doing squats, that black rubber, should never put that on the side of a wrestling mat, because that stuff you go from sliding to then sticking.

So we're at Madison Square Garden, and they were trying to probably protect the hardwood, or the ice, or whatever it was. When my arm hit that, it just stopped, and all our weight came down on it. Then I'm like, "Oh, my dreams being taken away before I ever even get to do it once." I'm like, "I'm out of wrestling, and jumping all into MMA." Because for me, success – I don't even know if this is a definition of success, but it's manhood. For me, my personal definition of manhood wasn't when I could drink, wasn't when I could join the military, wasn't when my dad told me I was a man or anything like that. It was when I could be an MMA fighter. That's when I'm a man now. So I tried to expedite that process, and I was the youngest guy doing it at heavyweight, professionally at 19. I was on Ultimate Fighter at 21. Then it's been, yes, a decade or more of fighting.

**[0:38:10] LW:** You retired yourself from fighting at 23, stepped away from the sport. What were those circumstances, and what was the plan? What were you going to do with your life?

**[0:38:19] JW:** The plan was, I was going to sacrifice, or step away for a year of fighting. Because it was four years, actually since I was 18. So that's five years of OxyContin addiction.

**[0:38:31] LW:** No one knew about or di people know about this?

**[0:38:35] JW:** No, they found out about it, but they didn't know about it for a bit. The sport didn't know about it until I talked about it, or like fans, and things. But I got kicked off my fight team.

**[0:38:46] LW:** Because of the oxy.

**[0:38:48] JW:** Yes, because I couldn't show up for myself, or the guys getting ready for the world championship fights. I was literally training with guys that were on my wall. Their poster was on my wall whenever I was a kid. Now, they're my teammates, and they're Hall of Famers, and they're my coaches. And I can't show up because when I'm going through withdrawal, if I tried to not be on it, so now I'm having to train high. Yes, after my fights, it was like full bore addiction. At first, I could sober up for eight weeks before the fight, and then sober up for three weeks before the fight, and then sober up three days before the fight. Then like, I'm using the night before the fight, and then it's like, "Oh, man. I'm starting withdrawals this early right after I stopped, I better take something today." Day of the fight.

It was hard because I was winning, and I even left the sport on – it wasn't a big win streak. It was like a three-fight winning streak. Everyone's like, "What are you doing?" Joe was one of those. "What are you doing? Why are you walking away from the sport? Sky's the limit. You can have another decade two decades to fight." But I wanted to get my life right, and I just found out like I was fighting against people, but really, I was supposed to be fighting for people.

I'd started volunteering, and it just started small, and it started to grow. I heard the quote, "No act of kindness, no matter how small, ever goes wasted." I was just like, man, there's been some people that were truly not a small act of kindness, but a huge act of kindness to help me during this transition phase of addiction. And there's been small ones that meant so much to me. So I'm just going to try to do that for this year. So I started volunteering at a children's hospital in Denver. Went through night school for like, six weeks, eight weeks, and then became an official volunteer there to where I could work with the kids with an oncology unit, pushing

them around before or after surgery, or around the hospital into the courtyard, and have meals with them, and just have fun.

**[0:40:45] LW:** Did you have money saved up at this time?

**[0:40:46] JW:** I had some, but towards the end of that year, it was rough, it was hard. Towards the end of that year, so I was at the Denver Children's Hospital in Colorado, and then I was at the Denver Rescue Mission with the homeless. Then I was volunteering at an inner-city kind of youth group, or at-risk youth group. It was like keeping me busy, and keeping me positive. But no, my bank account started to really drain. Towards the end of it, I got offered the best fight, meaning best matchup for the most money in front of the most people. It was going to be at the Saitama Super Arena in Tokyo, Japan. It was going to be in front of over 100,000 people, and I was going to make at least twice, if not like three times more than I've ever made in a fight.

**[0:41:33] LW:** How much people get paid in these fights?

**[0:41:35] JW:** I mean, you can get – there are fighters that are actually super low pay. I mean, there's champions that are fighting for \$100,000, \$200,000, \$300,000. So this would have been six figures, but it was at another organization than the UFC. But it was a perfect opponent for me. I'm like, "Yes, I sacrifice a year looking at the universe, rewarding me with good stuff. I'm back at it, and my fight team invited me back on." They're like, "Hey, you're doing good stuff." I brought them to the Children's Hospital. We did this whole big visit, and they're taking pictures with the kids with their championship belts.

So I got invited back on, and I guess, what happened that changed my life was I talked to a friend. I don't know why I feel like I'm not supposed to take this fight. When I sat with it, this is literally – I had a goals list as a kid. Number three was being a national champion wrestler, number two was fighting the UFC. Number one was fight at the Saitama Super Arena in Tokyo, Japan on New Year's Eve, because it's the epicenter of MMA, is fighting in front of that many people in Japan where pride used to be. Like, I got it offered to me. I'm like, "Why does it not sit right? It doesn't make any sense." The guy goes, "I don't know. Maybe you should pray about it." I was like, "Pray about it? What are you talking about?" So I sat with that for a few days, and then my manager was like, "You got to say yes or no." I'm like, "Okay."

So that was kind of the genesis of Fight for the Forgotten, really, because I was alone. I said a prayer. "God, what do you want me to do with my life? God, what do you want me to do with my life?" And I didn't know if I would hear something. I don't think clouds are going to separate or anything like that. I just said that a couple of times. Then man, I've experimented, and had basically all the psychedelics except iboga. I've done aya, buffo, DMT, psilocybin, ketamine, doctor-guided, psychologist, they're helping me, or psychiatrist, and all sorts of stuff.

But this was the biggest vision I've ever had in my entire life that felt absolutely real. But I knew it was a movie in my mind. And I was in the rainforest, walking down a footpath, and I heard drumming, and I keep walking. I'm like curious, and I hear singing. And I keep walking, and I'm clearing vines, and tickets out of the way, and I'm on a little bitty footpath. Then I come into a clearing, and the first guy I meet, we don't talk, but we acknowledge each other. I can see his ribs, and I know that he's like, hungry, thirsty, facing poverty. He's sick because he's coughing. And I know that I know that he's sick. I knew that he and them felt forgotten, and the huts were specific. They were twig and leaf huts, like big leaves, and there was a fire in the center of the village, and the community was set up in a circle, and the trees were huge.

I came out of that vision and I wept. I cried more after that, like almost hyperventilating, crying, more than probably any funeral heartbreak combined. I was crying for these people. I didn't know who they were, where they were, but they were the forgotten, hungry, thirsty, poor, sick, oppressed, and slave that they called someone master. I cried a puddle of tears. When I say puddle, it was like a silver dollar or grandma cookie size puddle, but I felt crazy. I wrote down on a piece of paper forgotten, and the six things: hungry, thirsty poor, sick, oppressed, and slaved. I thought I would never tell anybody. Because I thought like if I had some psychedelic, I could at least say it was that. Then, I started questioning, was that a psychedelic reactivation or was that a psychotic episode?

**[0:45:16] LW:** You're off the oxy at this time?

**[0:45:19] JW:** Yes, I was over a year sober. At least 11 months, completely. Oxy would make me dream, but I wouldn't remember. This was completely – it was sober vision. It was only three days. But for those three days, I was like, I'm not telling us all. I won't ever tell us all. Then, I

meet this guy that had lived with the Maasai in Kenya and Tanzania. He lived with a Vanuatu tribe that had invented bungee jumping with vines around their ankles, and they would kiss their foreheads, or the top of their heads on their yam harvest from bungee jumping, and it was like the rite of passage. I'm like, "Who is this guy? Where's this guy from?" He's friends with Bear Grylls and developed the survival training. His name is Caleb, and I have the piece of paper with me in my journal, and I'm just like, if there's one guy could tell that I'll never see again in my life, it's this guy. So, it's okay.

**[0:46:11] LW:** He was about to leave somewhere, and someone told you to – I think that's a theme in your story, is that you keep having this like internal urges to take action, and you keep listening to it. I'm sure you didn't listen to it a lot of times, but in those times, you did listen to it.

**[0:46:26] JW:** Those times I haven't, and I know I was supposed to. I was like, "Man, what would have happened? What could have happened? What should have happened?" That goes to this story, honestly. Because I get in my friend's car, he starts it up. He's getting ready to leave and I go, "Hey, wait. Timeout real quick. I'm going to go just give him my number, or get his number," something like that. So I walked back in, tell Caleb, "Hey, can I get your number?" or "Here's mine?" He's like, "You have something to tell me?" I was like, "For another time. You're busy, I'm busy. We're going different places." He's like, "No, man. Tell me real quick."

So I start telling him the vision, and he smiles. And I go, "What?" He goes, "I know who they are." I'm like, "Wait. Huh?" He goes, "They're Mbuti Pygmy people, and they're in the Congo Basin rainforest." I'm like, "Who? Where?" He goes, "I'm going in three and a half weeks." I was like, "What?" He goes, "But my team canceled three days ago. The US State Department said, no one go for any reason. The rebels took over the airport. They're killing people, all sorts of stuff, so no one's supposed to go. I don't even know how we get a flight in there right now." He goes, "But if you go, I'll go." I'm like, "Wait. Maybe we should wait. Maybe we should let things die down."

Then, instead of getting my buddy's car, I got in Caleb's truck, and we started driving to his house to meet his wife, Jess. He goes, "Look, you're going to have to tell Jess this vision. Because today, she said – it was either today or the day before. She said, "If you don't get assigned, you're not going Caleb, you're not going alone. You are going with a team of four.

Now, you're going alone. That's not okay. But if you get assigned, you can go. Tech thing." So we get there. I tell Jess, but I didn't want to tell Jess. She was pregnant, and she has an infant running around in the house.

So I tell him, and she looks at Caleb and says, "Caleb, you got to take this guy." I'm like, "Wait. Let's wait. We can go in a year from now or something." This is whenever they both started kind of coaching me. "If you don't go, you'll never know. This is the moment that you'll regret at the end of your life. And I'm ready to go, I have my ticket." I'm like, "Well, how are we even going to get in there?" He goes, "When we get to Uganda, we'll find a pilot. We're just going to go find a pilot. They'll fly us in there."

Literally that happened. We went, a couple of people said no. We were out somewhere. It was either a market, or hotel, or something, and we saw someone in a pilot's outfit, basically. We go ask him like, "Yes. Yes, we'll take you. But I'm in and out. I'm not going to stay around for very long."

**[0:48:53] LW:** And Caleb covered the cost of your flight to Uganda and all the other stuff.

**[0:48:58] JW:** No, no. So I have three and a half weeks to fundraise, because I got no money. I make a post on Facebook, and was my fight right before that? It was my fight either right before that, or the one before. I get a message on Instagram, "Give me a call." It's a guy I knocked out, and he says, "Hey, my wife and I want to pay for your round-trip flight." I'm like, "Wait. What?" So what's really cool about MMA is, you intimately know someone and like – like I know him in a way almost no human knows. He knows me in that way too.

So afterwards, you have this bond, or this camaraderie, however you say that word. It's just this kind of brotherhood of like, "Some guys have bad beef after, most don't." I was like, "Ah, you got me. Show me how you did that? He was one of those guys that beforehand, he talks so much trash. Then, in the fight, I mean, it was pretty quick, but it was a battle. Then afterwards, he's like, "Man, I talked that trash, because I wanted to get in your head. I wanted to throw you off." I was like, "It just gave me more ammunition, but more reasons to go in there, and get it done quick." So afterwards, we became friends, he sent me there. Then, another friend that came

with us named Colin. So Caleb and Colin, he helped with some of my other expenses, and he was a wealthy individual.

**[0:50:22] LW:** What was the post you wrote that inspire this guy to want to pay for your round-trip flight?

**[0:50:28] JW:** You know what, I need to go back and see – I don't use Facebook anymore, but I know I transitioned it from like a personal profile to a public page. So it doesn't go back as far as this, I think. But I would like to know what it was. I think it was really just a, "This is going to sound crazy, I'm taking more time off from fighting. But if I'm going to fight against people, I better at least fight for people. And maybe someday I could combine it together. But I'm on this journey, seeing if there was something I'm supposed to do. It's a scout trip to see if there's any way to tangibly help, and not really just give a handout, but a hand up, like long term. I don't know that I've verbalized it that way. But if we did anything charitable, we want it to be sustainable.

Yes, this guy was fighting, but also was transitioning out of it, and had a good job. So, him and his wife said, "Hey, we want to support you. If you're doing it, we want to get behind you." I was just like, "Well, really?" So I got to remember that, because sometimes fundraising still gets hard. If you get to go on a huge podcast, like it can really take off. Then, the times in between there, people just remember that moment in this sustainable stuff of monthly donors. Anyways, I have a meeting about it later today. How do we get an army of support around it?

**[0:51:46] LW:** I like covering these parts of the story too, because people listening to it, they may think, "Okay. Well, Justin's got a trust fund, obviously. He just flew his way to Uganda, which I imagine, it's very expensive back in those days." And to hear that you made yourself vulnerable, and you've talked about what your mission is, which is a very vulnerable thing for people to do publicly to say, "I want to fight for people." Because it kind of paints you into this corner now, where people have that expectation of your – at least you have that expectation of yourself. But it causes you to put yourself out there in ways that you probably wouldn't do otherwise, and to be open to receiving, especially after giving four years. So thank you for sharing that part of the story.

**[0:52:29] JW:** Yes, thank you. Yes, it's been up and down challenges. People think MMA fighters are rich, because it's the fastest growing sport. It's like, man, if y'all knew what I got paid, you wouldn't believe I got hit in the head for that. So it's a fun journey, and we have gotten to do some cool stuff, but it's a stretching journey, man. Like it's so much easier for me to get into a cage than to get on a stage. Or it's so much easier for me to literally fight a dude six foot ten, than it is to ask someone for a donation whenever they're like, "Well, why aren't you doing it?" I'm like, "Well, I do. When I fight, and I win, I give 10% of everything back to the charity I started, and because I believe in it." But it's a stretching, growing thing to be like, "Hey, I believe in this. I love them, and you would love them, and this is the right thing to do."

I truly believe it's different than some things, and people sometimes don't have a trust in charity, which I understand. I was that way. I mean, you got to find the right ones to support. So our thing is, there's been toxic —especially in Africa, there's been real toxic charity, that I call it Band-Aid aid, where it's a show up, blow up, blow out technique. Where you announced your arrival with a parade, you throw a party, get your pictures, you bail. That's why there's over 230,000 broken water wells in Africa right now, which is billions of wasted charitable dollars, billions. It's because it's not an inside job, it's not a local solution to a local problem, it's not locally affordable or locally sustainable. Or it is and they're not given the tools, put the tools, educated with the knowledge, or empowered to be the change in their own community, which they would be the best champions, and they are the best champions. They're the heroes of their own story or their own community.

Just like, them being given the opportunity. So we've said, opportunity is greater than charity. Charity can be great, but opportunity is mostly always better. In my mind charity, in the general consensus of the word of a handout, there's a new wave being ushered in and we're trying to do it on a small scale but open source it to where in this community we started with land, then water, then farms, then replanting trees. Now, it's going to be a fish pond, and beekeeping, and we're doing a health center, and a school. So it's land, water, food, education, medical care, and then that's going to be livelihoods, so like sustainable jobs.

It's a lot because it's a lot of moving parts, and its people. So you have to have everyone bought in, and it has to be transformational conversations. It has to be either their idea or a good idea that they accept, and say it's going to be a, "This is culturally sustainable, and this is what we



want, need, and will do." And then take ownership of it, and then dude, magic happens. Magic happens when people facing poverty get opportunity. So when I say charity, I feel like in the general senses of the word, charity could be reserved for famine, natural disaster, war. People with disabilities, who say they can't help themselves? But oftentimes, people with disabilities want the opportunity to help themselves, or show what they can break through, and overcome, and everything else. But poverty needs opportunity, and so that's what we're in the nonprofit business.

**[0:56:11] LW:** So describe the planes, trains, and automobile trip you had to take to get to that Pygmy village for the first time, and how did it match up to your vision?

**[0:56:21] JW:** Oh, man. Good call. I told Caleb, told Colin the vision, had it written down. We go, we take a flight from Denver, to I think DC, DC to like Belgium, and then Belgium Brussels to – I think we went to Qatar – is it Doha, D-O-H-A. Then, we went down to Kenya, or I think we didn't go to Kenya that time, I think we went to Kigali, Rwanda, and then back up to Entebbe. Then from Entebbe, we had to find a pilot that would be willing. It was just a pilot on a little plane with us three, that'd be willing to fly into the rainforest of the Congo, because we couldn't find the – not the capital, but it's kind of the capital of the East, which is Goma. It's a million-person city that was overtaken by a rebel group.

So we're circling a grass runway, where they don't know when the last time a plane landed there, when they're literally clearing it with machetes. And we see everyone that kind of coming from the community, kind of rushing out there, or it's just because we got there either early or they started late, and they needed more help. We land, there's a cliff on one side, there's 100-foot-tall trees, there's monkeys around, and on the runway. Which I had never – like, I've never been to Africa, and I've never had an idea. Maybe I've gone on a safari, but I didn't have this world, or framework, or perspective of like going and truly experiencing how incredible and amazing it is there.

So we land, we get out, we drive at least four hours, but I really think it was like six to eight hours. Then we're deep in the rain forest. We stay in a mud hut that has a tin roof. It was called a motel on the outside of it. It had like four little huts, and I woke up in the morning with a bright light shining on my face, and it was through a hole. I realized that we got there super late, and I

was super tired, and jet lagged, and everything else, that there's bullet holes in this hut that I'd stayed in that night. So I was like, "Oh, this is real. This is fresh. This is real. What am I doing here? I am a fighter, but fighting versus a gun, it doesn't really help too much."

So we drove for another hour maybe, two hours we got on motorcycles. We're going on motorcycles through the rain forest. I was the only one that didn't know how to drive a motorcycle. So like, I'm sitting on the back with a guy and everybody on motorcycles. Then, we get on these dugout canoes that are just literally hollowed out trees, and they're small for my size, and like we're almost taking on water. It's attached to the Congo River, which is the deepest, most powerful river in the world. But it's there, truly, yes, for sure.

So you have to aim basically way left to end way right. Because if you just go straight, you're going to get swept away. There's crocodiles and hippos around. I'm like, "What are we doing? Where are we?" We get across, we hike for another 30, 45 minutes. And then all of a sudden, I hear drumming, and we keep walking, and we hear singing. And we keep walking, and we come into a clearing. And the first guy we see, that him and I acknowledge each other. He's coughing, I can see his ribs, he's the guy from the vision, and there's the twig leaf huts. They're set up in the same exact way, and I have to take a knee because it's so surreal. I'm weak in the knees, almost dizzy. And I take a knee, and Caleb and Colin are kind of grabbing me on the trap saying like, "This is your vision. This is your vision."

I was just in this moment of like, "Does stuff like this happen?" Surely, it doesn't. I don't think I can compare it to *déjà vu*, but it was similar, but just amplified, like incomparable. Because it had happened before, or I did see it before. Now, I'm seeing in real life three and a half weeks later. So we stayed. And on the last, maybe it was the second to last night, I told Caleb – Caleb asked me, he goes, "What are you going to do?" "What do you mean what am I going to do?" I fell in love with the people, and their culture, and I danced around the fire with them, and we ate bush meats from the forests that they hunted, and we ate mushrooms that they gathered. Not the funny kind, but it was an incredible culture, an incredible culture.

But when Caleb said, "What are you going to do?" Like the things they asked for was land, because all their land had been stolen. They asked for water, because they had no clean water to drink, and their children were dying. They asked for food. Because of deforestation, the trees,

the animals were scared, and skittish and going deeper in the forest, and it was harder for them to hunt, and provide sustenance every day. "Caleb, what am I going to do?" "What are you talking about?" He goes, "It seems like you're supposed to come back. You got a vision." I'm like, "Dude, this problem is way too big, and I'm way too small." The visual, I think in like visual terms anyway. So I was like, it's like trying to empty the ocean with an eyedropper. Is it going to work? Is it going to help? Would anybody else or even myself notice? Caleb goes, "Dude, you got the wrong perspective, man." I was like, "What do you mean?" He goes, "Every single one of those drops you're talking about represent a human heart, a human life?" Yeah, it matters. It matters greatly.

Why does it matter if other people notice and things like that? Well, I just – what I mean is like, "I don't think it's possible." He goes, "Dude, you won't know if you don't try." He goes, "Why do you have a vision that came true if you weren't supposed to be here?" I'm like, "Well, good point." I go, "Is it selfish? Is it silly? Is it crazy to say I just need one more sign? I just need something." He got pretty passionate about that. "What are you talking about? What else more could you want than that?" I was like, "I don't know, man. I just need one more thing. If I get it, I'll dedicate my life to this, and I'll go all in, but I'm either all in or all out." So the last day – and Caleb was flustered, or frustrated with me. The last day, he goes, "All right. Let's say goodbye." "Well, okay."

The chief motion us over. We're standing there, and I'm in the middle, and Caleb, and Colin are there. I really connected, like I loved their culture, loved them. The chief said, "Hey, everyone else calls us the forest people, but we call ourselves the forgotten." He said, forgotten, I have the piece of paper that says forgotten at the top. He says, "We don't have a voice. Can you help us have one?" I told Caleb the day before, I go, "I just need some tangible I can do. Land, water, food. What are you talking about? I need some tangible." So when he said we don't have a voice, can you help us have one? Pointing at me. I said yes, but it was kind of like my soul screamed at if that makes sense. I was like, "That, I can do. I've got some buddies with some big podcasts. I have some other things going on, like I could fight, and if I win, I get the microphone, and I don't have to talk about myself. Awesome. I can talk about you guys, and what y'all are going through in a fight that's much greater than –" like fighting is cool, but I don't think it's great. There's greatness within it for sure.

But a water well celebration drowns out the sound of the Super Bowl which I've been to, the World Series which I've been to, the NBA Finals which I've been to. Whether it's in the suites, or on the court, or on the field. There are hundreds of people getting access to clean water for the first time, the depth of the cheers or the joy. It's not because someone scored a goal, or a hoop, or whatever. It's like a homerun or knockout. I've been to the UFC 100, 200, Manny Pacquiao's fights. Those are all great. They're good. But the celebration of like victory over death, or like victory because this is life giving. That's life changing for me, for them, for whoever gets to witness it. It's like this victory matters.

**[1:04:38] LW:** Give us a little context of who these people are. I know we call them pygmies. They refer themselves as that or just horse people?

**[1:04:45] JW:** Yes, they do. They nicknamed me The Big Pygmy. [Inaudible 1:04:49] is like the full name. But in Uganda, they call me The Big Pygmy. And, Afioso means the man who loves us, so I treasure that one. [Inaudible 1:04:59], The Big Pygmy. So they champion that name, but some people have used it derogatory, but they don't amongst themselves, and they're proud to be their tribe. But there's different groups within it. So across eight or nine African nations are the Pygmy people as a whole. Then there's the Mbuti, and the FA, and the Batwa that I have lived with, and spent time with. But there's the Baka, the Aka, the Biaka, and there's a few more groups as well.

So their average height is four foot six, to four foot seven for the men. They are hunter gatherers. And they might be small, but they have the biggest hearts of really anyone I've ever met. So I think it's the Guardian that posted about a stat. It might be some other publication or a study of some of the best fathers in the world. I think we do best fathers, and the Pygmy people or something, though, it will come up. I think the study, if I'm not misquoting it, anthropologist say that they spend at least 50% of the time holding their children when they're infants, and newborns, and things like that. Which is very different than most cultures, right? That's what I noticed right off the bat.

One, people were coming, putting their children in my arms, and it's like, "Oh, this is awesome. This is cool, but I'm not used to this." But then, just seeing how the men lean in and help out. That it's not like a burden, or that it's not like a duty, it's a desire, or it's a delight to do that. When

they hunt, they might have a baby on their back while they're out there hunting and gathering. It was just super touching to me to see how – when they have nothing, they can have so much. Nothing in our sense. They can also have everything in their sense, which is each other.

So they're the people that I look to of how to live in community. Really, that's how you and I were brought together is through another community here stateside. But I had been lacking that when I'm not there, and I get homesick for that. I've never been homesick while living in the US. I didn't get homesick until I came back from Africa. Literally, my mom would say, "Don't you miss me? Don't you miss home?" Well, I miss you, but I don't miss home. I'm not homesick. I don't get homesick." But there, it felt like, whoa, everyone contributes, everyone has a voice. Part of life there, in many ways, there isn't any privacy. But it's not like an intrusion. So if you're living in these twig and leaf huts, or you're living in these homes that we've built them, and let's say there's a marital dispute, everybody knows, everybody knows what's going on. But everyone's there to help, and to listen. Or to not but in, but like, "Hey, we're here" type thing.

If someone's in trouble – there's a guy, a story. It's the only time I've saw this. One guy was banished from a village, but they had to, they had to because this people grew up was currently living as like – had been born into slavery in the Congo. He was drinking, and drinking, and drinking. They kept telling him not to drink, and the slave master was beating him, and other things, which I hated. I wasn't there when that happened. But anyways, he got super drunk again, and they had these moments where basically like, if something's not happening right, they bring you to the center of the village, and you sit around the fire, and you talk it out, and you make change. You have to commit to it and agree to it. It's not in a way that's bad, it's way that's good for everybody. Okay, this thing can't happen anymore, and he did it again, and he got drunk, and he didn't just fight back his presser, he killed him, and so they had to get rid of him. It was like mourning a death of somebody, because he was part of their family, and their tribe and everything else.

So I might be going all over the place here. But when they suffer, they suffer together, and it's beautiful. The first funeral I had been to, it wrecked me. I buried a young boy named Mandibo, and he died just because of dirty water. That forever gripped my heart, and it crushed me, and it changed me. And it really put me on the path of like learning how to drill water wells, so that we could help prevent that from happening again. But man, I'm the one that saw his grandfather

first, and he saw it on my face that his grandson had died. He fell into the bushes, or like the greenery, and was just flailing on his back, and looked like he wanted to crawl out of his skin. But everyone came, and they helped him up, and I helped him up, and we brought him back to the center of the village, and everyone mourn together. It's not a pretty process at all, but I think it's a process that allows you to truly grieve and move through those emotions.

So here, a funeral, we put a suit on the body, or a beautiful dress on, and maybe even makeup, and we have all the flowers, and we get dressed well, and we come, and it is a celebration. But also like death doesn't always have to only be a celebration that you don't allow yourself to like move through it. So there, they will all mourn, and all cry, and all be on their faces if that's what it calls for when a child dies, like that's what it calls for. This is injustice. This shouldn't happen. This should be preventable. That is a life that was cut really, really, really short, and he was part of us.

The way that they mourn, like it changed everything to where now I allow myself to cry. I used to not – it's funny, because that's how it started. I cried like I've never cried before, before I ever met him. Then when I got there, I found out it's okay to really cry. I think it's healthy man. I think when I meet people here, I've lost friends to suicide, and their families, and people trying to hold it together. My encouragement to them now is like, "Hey, this really is terrible." I shared the eulogy at two funerals in 2022 that were by suicide, and they were friends of mine. My encouragement was just like, "Hey, to the family that lost their dad, and there's four boys. Hey, guys, if it's not going to be at the funeral, let's get together, and let's move some energy. Let's cry, let's talk, let's remember. Let's talk about the good things. But also, if there's anything we need to get out, let's write our regrets, what we didn't say to him. Let's write down the things we wish we would have said to him. The pain, the forgive you's, all that stuff. Let's like bring it." So we literally brought it to the fire, and we had letters we wrote out, and we burn those things.

Yes, I just think we have learned a lot from the people from – I wouldn't say the past, but that live more like original man. We've lost or forgotten a lot of things that are really meaningful to the human soul.

**[1:12:12] LW:** You've also said that when you share some of your suicidal experiences with the Mbuti, they had no idea what you're talking about, and your depression, and things like that. They're like, "What are you talking about?"

**[1:12:25] JW:** Yes. I remember one of the elders thought it was almost like a legend. He had heard about it from one person one time in history might have done that. But everyone was like, why would anyone ever do that? When they asked me that, I was like, "Huh. Why would anyone ever do that?" And I'm like, "Wait, I've done. I've attempted it twice, for real attempted it." So trying to explain it. In one sense, like, I don't know if it's insecurity or shame came up of like, I'm having to explain this to people that just – they have no context at all for it, because it would never make sense here. Another way explaining it, they're like, "Huh." That's why they're like, "We're never going there." That's what people are doing. They say, "Whoa. What's wrong with us?" We're comparing ourselves – comparison is the thief of joy, and we're comparing ourselves everyone's highlight reels, whether it's real or fabricated.

It steals joy whenever you have another group of people – there are questions where, if someone does that, it doesn't only hurt them, it hurts everyone, like it hurts the entire community. We need that person. Why would they ever take that away from us, and we have so much to give to them? Like, they can't, and life's hard enough as it is, and they could get sick and die. Why would anyone ever do that before their time? One of their prayers is, they're like, literally, whatever food they get, or when they wake up, it's like, "Oh, thank you." Whether it's God, universe, source, or their ancestors. They're like, "Oh, thank you for another day. We know there's many that didn't wake up today." Just the gratitude. I think we forget that each day is truly a gift.

**[1:14:14] LW:** So you come back, and the next step for yourself is, okay, I need to learn how to drill wells. Okay. How do you do that? You go on Google, and you look up drill wells in Uganda, or Congo, or what is that real practical next step to put it all together?

**[1:14:32] JW:** Funny enough, I went to [howtodrillyourownwell.org](http://howtodrillyourownwell.org), and I don't even know if that's still in existence. But what was funny was, I was trying to do what they were doing. But since I had no context or education around it, one, I was breaking everything. I went to Home Depot and Lowe's. I'm asking people, they're like, "You're trying to do what?" And I'm going to

my parents' backyard, they had a few acres, and everything's breaking on me. Then, I learned this thing called the jetting method, which is using a water hose to go in, and then you're basically slamming the earth, you're wrestling the earth. And as you're slamming this water that's jetting into it, it's pushing out water on the other side.

So anyways, it wasn't going to work because I had a friend in construction go, "Where are you going to get the running water from the hose." I'm like, "Oh, shoot. Yeah." So then I just started researching, and there's this manual drilling method with augers. So it's like coffee cans, with these, almost like fins, or hooks, or claws, and started developing, and helping, and talking to many different nonprofits, and mostly people that have been there and done it in Africa. So I met this team in Uganda, who's literally the guy that taught me how to drill wells as our team leader, which is awesome. Because he has over 500 wins under his belt. So meaning, he's drilled over 500 wells for his community, or his country.

He came, and he lived with me for three months. He taught me in the field, because really, I tried for three or four months beforehand, with a minimal training I had in the US. I mean, everything that worked in the US did not work in the rainforest. There's collapsing zones, and all sorts of stuff you have to advance through. We dig 60 feet in the earth, and then we take a break, or we go to sleep, and wake up, and come back the next morning, and there's like a two-foot-deep hole, when we spent like 10 days drilling it for at least, – let's say literally three, or four, or five days drilling it to get it that deep.

So our sweet spot is about 60 to 80 feet deep in the rain forest, maybe up to 100 feet deep. For manual drilling, if you advance beyond 20 feet, and you have a sanitary seal. Anyways, this is technical, and I'm not the best at it. But if you have a sanitary seal with impermeable clay, and a cement plug at the top. If it's below 20 feet, and there's a good recharge rate, and porosity of the soil, and permeability, you can get a well. But it's the rain forest, so we would like to go deeper with the water tables there. But now, up in the mountains where we're drilling now, we're having to go 300 feet, 350 feet. And for that, you need a truck. So we literally, last year, we built over 13 kilometers of new road to these communities in the mountains, and in the rainforest, so that we can get water wells to them and rebuild the homes. It's been fun man.



What I love about it is in fighting, you got to find a way, you have to find an opportunity, you have to make something happen. If everything shutting down on your offense, you got to figure out something new, go back to the drawing board, and you have more time in this work than a 15-minute fight. So it's like problem solving on a bigger scale of like, "Okay, that didn't work. But would this work? Okay, we can't – all there are footpaths, what if we actually make a road." I've said no to that for more than a decade. I'm like, "That's too much work." I don't want to cut down trees, and so we're going to hike everything in. It's one ton of well drilling equipment, but we'll get the community's help. They want to help us.

Big guys will carry the big stuff, and then other people will help, and we'll just have like this assembly line of people taking everything from the truck into the village. That can be an hour hike, a two-hour hike, it'd be a three-hour hike. But you get it in there, everyone supports it. Then it's so rewarding at the end, because it was hard, but that was worth it. Now, we're not having to cut down a bunch of big ancient trees, we're able to create these roads. It's been fun. We have to put people to work, and it's what they really need. So now, road can take a pregnant woman that goes into labor early, and her baby turn the wrong way, we can rush her down to a health clinic, and save her life because of vehicles.

**[1:18:45] LW:** Going back to the wrestling metaphor, the whole idea of learning one or two moves really well, instead of going in, and trying to fix all these people's problems. You pick one thing like water. Let's just focus on water, get really good at that, and then we can create a system around it, and then we can duplicate that as much as we need to.

**[1:19:07] JW:** Yes, it's been fun. We've provided it. We do low estimates, but we've done 83 wells, and providing clean water to at least over 50,000 people. But that's been all them doing it for themselves. I mean, I helped with the first 13 wells, but it's literally employing local people that then get to create their own business around it, that then gets a maintenance it, and operate it, and go on to a new community, and do that.

Our stuff really hubs around water, but we call it whole community development. On this health center, we have two big partners, that that's what they do. So we identified the people, the community wants it, and now we're bringing in our partners to do what they do best. Same thing, we're going to do that with the school. We do land, water, food. We're really good at that,

and water is probably our best thing. But getting land acquisition back in their name, lobbying on their behalf, petitioning with the government, making sure it's sponsored, and supported by the local, state, and national government. At least the province and national government like we do that really well. We have over 10 years of experience. And you have to have the land before you drill the water, or else it can be taken away from them, or they'll be pushed off of it.

**[1:20:18] LW:** Ironically, the land was taken by the animal conservationists in the rainforest's preservationists, right?

**[1:20:25] JW:** Isn't that wild? The most sustainable people in the world were kicked out of the rainforest in the name of sustainability. It doesn't make any sense. But the chief would say it this way, [inaudible 1:20:34]. He would say, "Because of the protection of endangered species and animals, we've become an endangered people."

**[1:20:43] LW:** For those first 13 wells that you were directly involved in, how many trips, how much money, how much energy was invested into that?

**[1:20:52] JW:** So I lived there for a year, and the goal was to get one water well per month. We failed on every attempt for the first four or five months, and then we found our rhythm.

**[1:21:06] LW:** What was the shift?

**[1:21:07] JW:** The shift was getting B.Tech, B.Tech from Uganda to come live with us, because I was trying it the Texas way, I didn't have the experience. I'm like, I know what to do. I can't lead this thing. It has to be someone that's actually had big wins. I'm just the trainee trying to train others. I need like a powerhouse here. So B.Tech came, and literally risked his life being Ugandan, staying in the Congo. His car flipped, it was a taxi driver for Congolese that flipped his car, it hit somebody, they got injured. And because there's not really justice there, there was mob justice.

So they literally were trying to put a tie around B.Tech and wanted to set them on fire. They did set the car on fire, they looted \$15,000 worth of welding equipment. He narrowly escaped with his life. They thought it was for Golden diamonds, the drilling equipment. So he came, he lived

with us for three full months, and I just watched them, and our team watched them. We got two or three wins, and that was just so awesome. Like in three months, oh, we had three or four wells done, and we had five months of zero, right? Then all of a sudden, here's three months getting four or five wins. Then whenever we went back, we started identifying more places, going out, drilling more wells.

Can I just say, one Swahili proverb – I actually have a few I could share, but I was in a rush, and I think through that, I wasn't taking as much time as needed to like understand the process, understand the technique. There's literally a feel, just like a wrestling move. If you're trying to pull a rock up that's in a hole, you got a wedge that thing in there, that's a feel. You're wrestling the earth, and you got to feel when that kind of clicks, and lodges in, and then slowly pull it out. And if you pull it out too quick, it hits the edge, that rock goes right back down to the middle, and now you've wasted a lot of time.

They say, you Westerners all have watches, but us in Africa, we're the ones with the time. I was just like, "Whoa, that's good, like slow down." Then if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. But then the Swahili proverb because I've had – I've had malaria a bunch of times now. My last trip, I got it twice, and I was on the anti-malarial pills, and I still got it. But it's just a hotspot in the world. And they say, "If you think you're too small to make a difference, try to sleep in a closed room with a mosquito." I love that Swahili proverb, because I have fought guys six foot seven, six foot eight, and six foot ten. Skip six foot nine. I finished those fights in the first round. Some of them was bloody, some of them was beat up. But none of those guys, six foot ten, 260 pounds took me out as much as less than a one-gram mosquito.

If that little thing can make that much of a difference in my life, how much more of a difference can each one of us make in the lives of somebody else, or in our community, in our company, in our family, in our country, and in the world?

**[1:24:08] LW:** Beautiful, man. I think that's a great place to end it. You have so much in your story that I wanted to get to, but there's a book called –

**[1:24:13] JW:** We could always do it again if you want.

[1:24:15] **LW:** Yes. Now I see why you're on Joe's podcast ten times, there's so much to talk about.

[1:24:20] **JW:** Yes. I appreciate it, man.

[1:24:20] **LW:** But you do have a book called, *Fight for the Forgotten*. You have a website, [fightfortheforgotten.org](http://fightfortheforgotten.org). What's something if someone's listening to this, and they're getting all inspired, and they want to contribute, what's something that they can do? What's the best way?

[1:24:35] **JW:** Well, I really appreciate, you could post the show out, and give you a five-star rating if they love your podcast.

[1:24:42] **LW:** Said from a fellow podcaster.

[1:24:44] **JW:** Yes. But no, the way they can support is, man, we're looking for people that can give \$5, \$25, \$40 a month on our website under give or donate. There's a monthly giving option. So you can give once and that's great. But I mean, if literally had a choice to give \$50 now or \$5 a month, I would choose \$5 a month, because it will start to be able to calculate, and grow, and like scale, and budget, and plan. I really think we're on a trajectory to do 10 times more impact. That means, we need to be raising at least two or three times more than what we have, because money goes far there. I love our team, they're so wise with it, and they really make it account. That's the way.

[1:25:30] **LW:** I'm sure a lot of people also wonder why go all the way over there when there's so many problems in America. But the way I would answer that – well, I've been asking you the question is, that was your calling. That was the calling, that's where it starts. And for all we know, it could loop back around to America in 10 or 20 years based on what you've learned over there. So people, you have to have – if you have your calling, you have to see it through no matter where. If it's in Timbuktu, if it's in Antarctica, you have to go and see what that's about so that you can learn what you're there to learn, and do what you're going to do with that.

[1:26:00] **JW:** Well, thank you. I would say, for me, every – I don't mean to say dark, but every place on planet Earth means a whole lot more of light and love, every dark nook and cranny, or

every community. That was my calling. And if I wouldn't have answered that call, I'm really scared of where I would be. I don't think they just changed my life. I truly believe they saved my life.

**[1:26:26] LW:** And those three guys, you saved their lives too. It wasn't even about talking about this. It was about talking about your experiences to suicide, but you probably would not have had that opportunity had you not been doing the work that you were doing. Beautiful, man.

**[1:26:42] JW:** I'm so grateful for you.

**[1:26:43] LW:** Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. There's so much more for us to talk about and connect on, but I'm glad you came on. You also have your own podcast, Overcome. So, we'll put all that in the show notes, obviously, and we'll do this again. I want to have you back on and talk a little bit more about your story, because it's so fascinating to me. Let's definitely hop back on at some point soon.

**[1:27:06] JW:** Yes, thank you. Thank you. This was great.

**[1:27:09] LW:** Absolutely.

[OUTRO]

**[1:27:09] LW:** Thank you for tuning in to my interview with Fight for the Forgotten founder, Justin Wren. You can follow Justin's work on the socials. He is @thebigpygmy. And, of course, I'll put links to everything that Justin and I discussed in the show notes, which you can find at [lightwatkins.com/podcast](http://lightwatkins.com/podcast). If you are thinking, "Wow, I really love these interviews, how can I support the podcast?" The best way to support is to just take 10 seconds to leave a rating or a review. That's because one of the ways that potential guests will vet a podcast is they'll check how many ratings this podcast have, how many reviews does it have. Because that tells that potential guest that this podcast is something that people are engaging with, and that it is worth their time to accept my invitation to come on and have a conversation.

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

[END]

