

EPISODE 180

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[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:43.3] LW: Hello friends and welcome back to The Light Watkins Show. I’m Light Watkins and I interview ordinary folks, 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 with as their mission in life and in doing so, they’ve been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who’ve either heard about their story or who’ve witnessed them in action or people who have directly benefited from their work.

And today, I am back in conversation with my old childhood friend, who happens to be now be the first Black mayor of my hometown of Montgomery, Alabama. His name is Mayor Steven Reed, and Steven has a new book out called, *First, Best: Lessons in Leadership and Legacy from Today’s Civil Rights Movement*, and the book goes into areas of his backstory that we didn’t actually get into in our first podcast conversation together.

More than that though, I wanted to make this a sort of handbook for running for office and what it’s really like to throw your hat in the ring for a local office in politics. That is if you or someone you know is feeling called to get more involved in politics because here’s the thing, the easiest thing to do when there are issues and challenges and problems on the local level is to complain, to be negative, to criticize.

The much harder thing to do but that's arguably more productive is to roll your sleeves up and be the change that you want to see in the world or at the very least, to support someone else who is trying to be the change that they want to see in the world. So, that's kind of how I framed this conversation. We talked about Steven's upbringing and the two times that he was faced with guns prior to running for office, it was very dramatic.

We also talked about Steven's biggest challenges while running for office and what sorts of issues he confronted once he was eventually voted as mayor and as probate judge prior to that. We also talked about how Steven's early-year experiences of having a failed sandwich franchise and crunching numbers at American Airlines prepared him for what he would be experiencing as mayor many years later when he didn't even think he would ever run for public office, which again, just goes to show that everything you're doing, right now is going to come into play at some point down the line as you get deeper into your purpose.

So, I always recommend going back and listening to the first episode that I have with a guest, they're coming back on again and this was a shorter-than-usual conversation but it was a very sweet one. I'm honored that Steven and I were able to hop back on and have this second conversation and I think you're really going to enjoy it. So, without further ado, let us get to it. Here's my conversation with the 57th Mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, Mayor Steven L. Reed.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:04:04.0] LW: Steven Reed, Mayor Reed, thanks so much man, for coming back on to the podcast. Good to see you again, you're looking good.

[0:04:09.7] SR: Hey, listen, thank you, man. I appreciate that. Thanks for the opportunity and always good to come back and talk with brothers and friends, man.

[0:04:17.2] LW: Absolutely. So, we did an episode together before and we went really deep into your backstory. So, we're not going to do that again for this episode but you just released a book on October 10th, 2023 called *First, Best*. I remember the original title was *Raising Kings*. So, I guess the publisher wasn't crazy about that title? We'll talk about the title, *First Best*, what does that mean?

[0:04:43.6] SR: Yeah, they publisher nor the author. So, it was both of us.

[0:04:48.2] LW: I thought that was your idea, *Raising Kings*?

[0:04:50.7] SR: No, that was my coauthor, Fagan Harris, who I love but that theme was out there attached to a lot of different songs, other books, you know, those kind of taking, those kind of compromises or phrases. So, I didn't feel like it was really unique to the story, and one of the things that I wanted to do was to have something that was unique and to express kind of what I'd gained and what I wanted to share, to that next generation and that was not going to be the first because that's relative.

I don't view the first and most things in 2023, maybe the way we would have in 1963. It's just a different time but I've viewed it more so from the standpoint of not just being the first but being the very best, and that being something we ought to project more than just talking about this person is the first Black mayor. Well, that's great but my goal is to be the best and that's how we came to that title and wanted to kind of add a little subtitle of the lessons and legacy from today's civil rights movement.

[0:05:54.0] LW: Yeah. You're currently in your second term as the first Black mayor of Montgomery, Alabama, which is significant just because of the history of Montgomery, Alabama being the cradle of the confederacy, et cetera, and so one of the things I love when people write a book is I get to see the more granular path, right? Because when we had our first conversation, I did my research and I was able to uncover things here and there.

But I really got to see some of the behind-the-scenes and so there are some terminology that I want us to define before we get into the conversation that you used throughout the book starting with Black belt. I want to talk about what the Black belt is for the listener and I also wanted to define – you used the term Joshua generation versus the Moses generation. So, what are those terms referring to?

[0:06:45.5] SR: So, for those who are unfamiliar with the geography of Alabama, that includes a lot of Alabamians by the way, the Black belt is a region that stretches across the central portion

of the state, which was known for its rich Black soil. It also just happened to have, in part, due to its rich Black soil, the highest level of Black population living in this region of Alabama from east to west, and so it's kind of referred to as the Black belt.

But it's an area that is probably more rural than it is urban like other parts of the state and certainly is more economically depressed but rich in terms of history because that's where Selma, Alabama. That's where Montgomery resides, Lowndes County, all these are in this Black belt region of the state. So, when I referred to the Black belt, that's what we're talking about there.

And as it relates to the Joshua generation, I first heard the term coined during President Obama's rise to running for office in 2007 and he talked about the Moses generation obviously leading Israelites out to the promised land but certainly, not making it there and Joshua generation and Joshua and Caleb were those that made it to the promised land, Moses did not being the beneficiaries of that work and of that sacrifice.

And I view our generation very much as a part of that with Dr. King and Hosea Williams and John Lewis and Ralph Abernathy and Rosa Parks and some Amelia Boynton Robinson, so many others, they were our Moses then. We are the Joshua generation, those that have gotten there and seen many of the benefits of their work and their sacrifice and I can't put it near as eloquently as President Obama did when he was running for office and continue to do while serving but that's what we were referring to in the book.

[0:08:50.2] LW: You had a pivotal moment, we talked about it in our previous conversation with Obama specifically but before we get to that, there were a few other pivotal moments in your life. One was when you were in fourth grade and you happened to answer the phone when your dad was away and he had a separate line and you didn't understand why there was a separate line.

And so, talk to us a little bit about your dad for those of us who haven't heard your origin story and just through that experience of you bringing it up later on and your dad taking you out to the garage. Like, give us a sense of what he was like?

[0:09:24.7] SR: Yeah, my dad grew up in a single-parent household. His dad was killed at the age of nine in rural Alabama area, connected county Southwest Alabama, and came to Alabama State after going to the army and at Alabama State, he became a student leader. He was a student body president and there was there that Dr. King handpicked him to be one of those ladies who would go on to Raleigh, North Carolina with many others to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Diane Nash and obviously, John Lewis and so many others who are a part of that movement at the time, and after that or while there, he was one of 17 students that helped integrate Montgomery lunch counter. So, he was an activist at the earliest time and you know some would say the most dangerous time, when students were integrating and pushing for change all across this country, in particular, in the south.

So, my dad has a great story and I think he turned that into advocacy, where he not only in leading the Alabama State Teacher's Association, which was the Black Teacher's Association at the time, which was, when we think about it, you know, the primary way that most Black people in a post-civil rights world or certainly, post-integration world, where getting to the middle class was through government jobs and education was a big one.

So, he was leading that organization and then turned it into a political advocacy when the elders called him to lead a group called the Albany Democratic Conference. It was and still is the oldest Black political caucus in Alabama at a time when Black people would just get in the right to vote in Alabama, very significant, and as a young leader and someone who had been an activist, he channeled that energy into voting power and then to political power to then go and push to become one of the first Black city councilman elected in 1965 right here in Montgomery, Alabama.

Served with your dad for a number of years there, but also took that platform, you know, even larger to the democratic party to push the democratic party to bring more Black people into the party, be seated as delegates in 1968, and to continue the push all the way through his work in public education as the second in command at one of the largest teachers unions in the country, the Alabama Education Association.

So, that's kind of a quick thumbnail sketch on his career but it really has been even as an elected leader and as an organizational leader, always been grounded in activism and that's something that I think, either we didn't know we were being taught, we were being taught or we didn't know we were being told, we were being told, and something that you know, I really appreciate, and something that it's certainly is a part of our approach not only to what I do as mayor but just kind of what I do overall.

[0:12:26.2] LW: So, you're nine years old, you answer the phone that day, what does the caller say?

[0:12:30.8] SR: Yeah. So, fourth grade, getting home from elementary school, my dad is on the city council and is pretty much the face and voice for Black political influence at the city and certainly one of two or three at the state level here, and it's interesting for me to think about, that was you know, 84-ish, 1984 I'm pretty sure, and think about how approximate that was to Dr. King being assassinated and kind of 60 years seems like a long time but it's really not now that I've gotten older, it doesn't seem like that long ago.

But I pick up the phone as a fourth grader and the caller says, "Is Joe Reed there?" And I say, you know, "No, he's not" or something to that effect. He said, "Well good." He said, "Well, good, tell that nigger if he doesn't shut up, we're going to blow his GD head off." And it was like, "Wow." I mean, and he says it in a way that you know, maybe you've seen some of the old John Grisham books that were adopted into movies with that southern accent and that level of hate.

I mean, I can't even act it out. For me to hear as a fourth grader, I mean, I wet myself at the time. He did sound real because I grew up hearing about Dr. King being assassinated. Not just like, once or twice or read about it but I mean, hearing about it, we heard about Medgar Evers being assassinated in his driveway, hearing about it and for us, that's what my dad in part always pulled into the garage, which you know, I didn't know at that time.

So, to hear somebody say that to somebody who you know was a child, it was just being real and striking to me and it was certainly a pivotal moment growing up and got to let me know that things were a little bit different from me than it probably were for some of my friends and family.

[0:14:18.7] LW: And your dad took you out to the garage and he put you inside of the infamous Oldsmobile?

[0:14:23.6] SR: Yeah. You know, he took us outside. He took me outside and just kind of talked about why he did the work that he does, what he was doing at the time, and why it was important that we not let that dictate our outlook onto other people and you know, you just kind of told a story, I understand the sacrifice, you know, that he was making but also, the cause that he was committed to and he just talked about not letting hate drive us, not letting bigotry drive us, even if it drove other people and it was just something that still stays with me to this day.

[0:14:56.2] LW: But he also showed you something from the glove compartment as well to kind of ease you –

[0:15:01.0] SR: Oh.

[0:15:02.5] LW: Ease your mind a little bit.

[0:15:03.2] SR: Oh yeah. Yeah, he showed us his piece.

[0:15:07.4] LW: His Smith & Wesson.

[0:15:08.4] SR: That's right, he showed us his piece because you know, we can never go in the glove compartment. It was like off limits. It's like, "Come on man, what you got, some gum in there? You got some candy you don't want to share?" No, it's not gum or candy. There was some heat as they say and that's kind of where he kept it and I understood why he told us, you know, told me why, because he had told my older cousin that we just didn't know, my brother and sister not, at least I did and he just told me why he carried it.

[BREAK]

[0:15:44.0] LW: I remember discovering my dad's piece, he had a piece as well. He kept it in his sock drawer, I don't know why he kept it in a sock drawer but under the same kind of circumstances, he would get these crazy phone calls and I remember a couple of times, he

would leave the house late at night with his gun. I don't know where went or what he did but it was, you know, a tense moment in those days in Alabama back during his city council days as well.

But just to flash forward, you graduate. Just like me, you couldn't wait to get out of Montgomery, Alabama, and get as far away as you could. So, you end up working at American Airlines and you're kind of – what are you? Like a data analyst or something like that or?

[0:16:24.8] SR: Listen, that's a nice way of putting it. I was a data monkey.

[0:16:27.6] LW: A data monkey.

[0:16:28.7] SR: We would just key this stuff, man, you know, we were just doing stuff all day. Things like answer the email, I mean, we just keyed in stats and data all day. You know, the title was financial analyst marketing performance but yeah, it was a come-in-at-the-bottom type job but it was you know, part of the man and loser program, you start at the bottom and you know, hopefully, you rise up.

[0:16:52.4] LW: I'm a strong believer that whatever people are doing, whether you're working at the deli at the supermarket or if you work in at a toll booth, you are learning something that's going to come into play later on in your purpose, in your life trajectory, and so looking back now, at those American Airlines days, you talked about how they don't want to hear anything you had to say unless you can back it up with numbers.

So, what were some of the takeaways that you now reflect back on and think, "Okay, wow, I got this part of my current job the way I see things now" from that experience?

[0:17:26.6] SR: Oh yeah, oh man, so much I learned in that job and I tell people, from my own business as well, you learn probably the most when you're having to do things that kind of at that grassroots, at that bottom level, right? Because you're so close to everything and everyone versus you know, you kind of rise up, you kind of get a little further away, sometimes you get a little insulated and you aren't quite as in touch as you think you are.

But some of the lessons I took away were one, the customer isn't necessarily always right but the customer always matters. So, it's not a matter of them being right or wrong but they matter, they're rubbing to your bottom line when you're in business regardless of how large a business is. Perception is reality but the other thing is that data drives results. You know, that numbers are key at the end of the day in terms of what ultimately, you know, businesses and organizations rise and fall on.

You can have your emotions, you can have your opinion but the data and the facts are going to be key drivers, and I think the third and pardon, most key of one is that diversity was tantamount at American. A global company, something I bring to this job right now, people from all different backgrounds and beliefs and essentially, you are brought together to respect differences, and for us, that can be hard sometimes.

It can be hard, it can be tricky for us to do but coming in there that first day and seeing that banner, respecting differences, coming from Moorhouse College where — a very conservative, HBCU, all men in particular at that time, across to your course on Spellman College, all women but it was different and it was like, okay, you got people literally all around the globe speaking various languages and there was something there and the whole goal was we're a team.

We're an organization and we're driving things forward and we respect the differences that we may have and that's the philosophy that guides me to this day.

[0:19:34.3] LW: You also mentioned in the book how you realized from that experience how interconnected everything and everyone was even though it was based, I believe, in Dallas but you were dealing with circumstances and issues and opportunities all around the world because obviously it's a global company.

[0:19:51.4] SR: Yeah. It's based at Fort Worth and I would be shunned for life if I didn't correct that and most people say, Dallas but only inside the culture of AA is there the distinction that there is Fort Worth and there is Dallas and people would say, "Well, no, the Dallas Airlines is Southwest. So, if you want to go there, go there to Southwest and let them give you some peanuts." That's what we used to say back in our day, right?

When Southwest would give you those peanuts. Hey, but on those flights, you know, to Chicago and everywhere else, those peanuts came in handy so I'm not complaining but no. I think the interconnected part of working there and working long hours and working with other high-achievers and go-getters was that you realize there's far more we have in common than we don't and I was just always curious about other parts of the world.

You do a lot of world traveling now and you've done it for a number of years. I don't know, I was curious about that we were brought up as travelers but not necessarily international. We were going to see family, in big cities, and then in those big cities, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and parts of Jersey, you get introduced to these other ethnic enclaves, Little Italy and all that stuff, China Town or whatever it may be.

But for me, I've been an interconnected piece was very important because it showed me that even in a big company and even in a big world, there are just varying degrees between us all and I think that helped genuinely grow my personal, self. Spiritually, I became more mature in part because of that. I became more conscious about other cultures and other people and what they valued and how that was similar in some ways but different in many others.

But being able to appreciate that was just a tremendous takeaway. I tell, even people to this day, didn't serve in the military and I know that's someplace else where people get kind of get thrown in together and you got one mission but being at a company organization like that, even though you don't appreciate it in the moment if you respected enough, it will add value for the rest of your life in terms of how you look at things and how you really go about your life and how you treat others.

[0:22:16.3] LW: I mean, it sounds wonderful and you know, you're living in a major metropolitan area and you're able to travel all around the world. How did you know it was time to leave, to go to grad school?

[0:22:26.4] SR: Yeah, you know, I think I got a little frustrated. I kind of got somewhere – so, when I was recruiting, it was like, “Hey, you start in this company, you're going to be on this rotation” right? You start with department and you get to see all sides of the market, what

marketing at a big airline, and man that sounds fun. Again, nobody tells you that's 60 hours a week, you're going to be doing a lot of Excel spreadsheets, a lot of analytical work.

You're thinking of the four Ps and all the things of selling and promoting and all that stuff but kind of being locked in, into being a numbers guy. That was never really just me, I wasn't really want to be in, just in a cubicle, for the rest of my career. I really thought that I had more skill in my personality and just who I am, than that. So, I wanted to do a little bit more professionally, want to get paid more like most young professionals.

I decided to get out to the management consulting world, which a lot of my good friends had gone into, coming out of college, they were making very good money for our age at the time, and they seemed to be having a great time doing it and so I was like, "Man, I think I could do that and it sounds fun and you know, let's see where it takes me." And ended up getting an offer with some a small firm in Atlanta and then shortly after that, I mean, within a year, a calendar year, 9/11 happens and so the economy just goes into — it just craters.

So, 30% of the company is laid off and the last hire first fire, you know, that was me. So, just after buying a condo in Bucket at the time, thinking, "I've made it" by next thing, one of the places that Diddy, he went, and I think it was Puff Daddy owned at the time. So, I mean, I was, you know living my best life and then real world happened and it is like, "Oh, not so fast." Justice, that was it, that was the spot in Atlanta. Justice.

So, at that point, it was like, "Okay." I'm thinking about going back to grad school, this may be the time to kind of figure things out, and that certainly helped me make that decision.

[0:24:31.8] LW: And you had a passion for business at that time, and having your own business and you had the bright idea of starting up a franchise in Montgomery, Alabama that your dad tried to talk you out of. I love the conversation in the book where you all were eating hamburgers and your dad's trying to tell you how thin the margins are in the restaurant business and you don't — you're not buying and he goes, "How much was your hamburger?" And you said USD 2.

[0:24:58.8] SR: You got it down, that's exactly right.

[0:25:01.7] LW: So, anyways, you open up Roly Poly, I remember this, I remember you having this franchise and – because my brother worked there, Dustin worked there for a little while but yeah, you mentioned how this is a four-year-long endeavor that didn't quite turn out the way you wanted it to turn out and it culminated in this incident that happened at 9:57 in the evening.

[0:25:24.4] SR: Yeah. The entrepreneurship thing is still in the book, I still have, right? In another chapter of life, I'm going to get back to that because I still believe that it's over important to do and I probably followed business, good or bad, probably as much as I follow and more so than I follow politics. So, still being interested in that because of why I think it matters to create jobs and be able to show that example, in particularly in a city like ours.

I tell people this quite a bit that in Montgomery, we talk a lot of politics, prayer, and we talk protests but we don't talk profit, and that's not to say that money is everything. It's not but in the realm of American society and the world of capitalism, it's important and it something's that here in the South, most Black communities have not really championed, much less conquered and it's something that we still have to do and so, it's important to me.

So, I was reading Black Enterprise all the time and I was thinking of all these notes and all these small business startup things, and you know, at that time, Amazon is still a bookstore. I told a group this recently and they were like, they didn't even know like Amazon started as an online bookstore and I'm like, "Yeah, you know where you can get to buy my book." It's just a book store, it's all it was, and they just couldn't conceive it at the time.

So, being passionate about growing a business, yeah, we thought we get in there and we're going to grow this franchise and sell it and keep turning things over, and little did we know that you got to have a little bit more capital than just you know, once you get your check in the counter that's what sells and some credit cards to grow and expand your business. So, when that incident happened, you know, we're about to close up.

And again, when you're running your own shop, you do everything and I just remember, you know, looking down, about to close up and I was kind of looking at the shelf right under me, kind of like how I am right now, and when I look back up, there was a gun right in my face. That gun

is you know, kind of right there, just out of the blue. I mean, I was like, "Wow." And the first thing I thought about was the teenager who was working there.

A real jovial guy, I mean, he made it fun, it didn't matter if it was a thousand people that we had to do orders for that day or if it were a hundred, and I just remembered thinking, "Man, do not shoot him, do not shoot me, I do not want to tell his mom, dad, him working that got him hurt or killed." So you know, I just kind of say, "Take all the money, just go" and try to do everything I've been teaching my cashiers at that moment to do.

But it was just something that I never forgot and I think it's something that humbles you in a way that one, you got know that there's God all high who is looking down to guide you and at the same time, just kind of put into perspective what really matters, what counts and at that time, I wasn't thinking about anything superficial, anything symbolic or any money.

It was, "Don't shoot this kid back here and hoping that don't shoot me, just take the money" and you know, we were all blessed that no shots were fired and nobody was harmed and they got out of there with a few hundred dollars that we got back. So, yeah, something that still sticks with me, for sure.

[BREAK]

[0:28:59.3] LW: Later on, as mayor or running for mayor, that became one of the themes of your campaign is we need to make it easier for people, especially Black-owned businesses to raise capital but before running for mayor, you decided to accept the call to become probate judge in Montgomery, Alabama and that was in part, due to, was it Sophia's Barbecue, the woman who was running that shop?

[0:29:24.8] SR: Yeah.

[0:29:25.1] LW: You getting to run around to get that, you know, license and you thought you know, this is not fair after having your own experience in running a business. So again, it all comes together, it all plays apart, and it becomes a part of the motivating factor for taking you to

the next step along your own trajectory. So, talk about running for office for the first time not quite sure you were going to win.

What does that even mean? How much does that cost? Like what's a real-world consideration because somebody out there might be listening to this right now thinking, "Maybe I should run for office but I don't really know what that means." It sounds like you were connected politically through your dad, is that something that's necessary for someone to have and if they don't have that, what's the next best thing to do?

[0:30:13.7] SR: I ran because I always say out of frustration is inspiration. I was frustrated by the lack of change when I went back to Montgomery, I've gotten on boards, I've tried to do things kind of outside of the elected establishment but just didn't see the growth. I didn't really see the movement coming and more importantly, I didn't see the mindset change. I think I was more impacted by that and I was just like, "Wow, man, you know we can't just be satisfied with these little baby steps we're taking when other folks are taking giant leaps, right? In other communities."

So, after trying to get friends of ours to run and how do we be considerate, it came to me in part out of the inspiration of President Obama's victory and what that meant that you know, maybe this was our time, right? And maybe I was one of those that needed to step up and lean in if you will to the position of public servant and for me, it was a gift and a curse to have parents who are active, who were known.

So, the gift was serving and then you come in and there are people who like you and people say, "Well, that's Joe and Mollie's son, that's great, we know them, we love them, they've done good things in the community, we're going to support you" but there's also those people who think that, "Oh man, you're just here because of your parents, right? You couldn't do it by yourself, so you're just doing you can on the family business and you all aren't helping anybody."

And that was part of the reason why I left Montgomery was to kind of create, I've talked about that in *First, Best*, was to get out from under that shadow of me. You know, my parents, their last name, and all of this stuff, and get somewhere you know, even though it wasn't geographically

far culturally Morehouse was night and day because you've got so many people there from so many places.

So, when I came to run for office, it did help to have that understanding of politics and public service and so many was net positive but the drawback was you have to kind of pushback on this thing that you're not your own person and I'm like, "Man, I left here being away from here than most of you all American dud, you all are the ones who never left" you know? It was like I left and came back and just found the car sitting on you know, two cinderblocks here and you all have been doing what I would have hold and would have thought.

So, for people who maybe listening, maybe interested in public service, I would say one, if your heart is in it, think about it. You know, long before I ran, I volunteered on campaigns then I worked on campaigns and then I ran myself and so you know, I tell people you don't have to jump into the deep end, you can kind of test it out a little bit and see if you like it and see if you don't but then the second thing is, you got to have a good nucleus of friends and family.

And I had, you know, I had friends that were encouraging, family that was encouraging because you need those things. In particular, if you aren't familiar with the system, wherever you may live, but I encourage people to get involved, to get active, and to talk to those people who are in public service because maybe they are looking for bright young minds in particular but people with outside ideas to help move the agenda and that for me was really big.

And then I guess finally, it was about how do we go and make our case through the community has been with this person for so long and I think that there is not much better we can do and my argument was one that it was time for us to move in a different direction, for us to move more proactively towards progress and equity and it was something that I thought the elders really had set the pathway for and the community was supportive of it.

And brought into that first run in 2012 and again, coming on the heels of coming at the same time as President Obama's re-election, there was a lot of symmetry there and there was a lot of interest and a lot of energy on bringing some new ideas and new faces and thoughts to the table here.

[0:34:23.6] LW: You also probably hope you don't get tested so much and you were kind of pressured pretty early on because gay marriage was legalized under your tenure and you're in Alabama, right? Which is not known as one of the more liberal states and there's 67 or 68 judges and they reached out to everybody and say, "You guys, we're not following this Supreme Court judgment, we're going to do our own thing. We're Alabama."

[0:34:51.7] SR: Yeah.

[0:34:52.3] LW: And you could have easily fallen in line but talk about that experience and what went through your mind, you know because again, this is – you're an Alabama man. To your point, you're not that far away from Jim Crow, civil rights, and all that stuff. Something crazy could theoretically happen.

[0:35:08.3] SR: Yeah. To be honest, I'll just tell you what I'm thinking. At that time, I didn't know that I was stepping out, right? At that time, I was really just doing what I thought was right and got to use the analogy before because sometimes it's not that you step up as others do step back and it was one of those like, "Wait a minute, I mean, this is simple. It is the right thing to do, it's the law, let's just do it" and man, I mean, I was blown away at the time by so many people who had these thoughts.

Again, I go back to my time in American Airlines, it was fighting differences who had these thoughts of what they should be and what should and how they would go about it. It was just amazing to be in those conversations and so at that point, it was like, "Oh, okay, you guys aren't just stepping back. You all are stepping back and want to make a stand on this." And for me, it was like just the opposite and I kind of put up myself being in that moment that we read about around pivotal times in America, pivotal moments.

I was like, "Okay, what would you do and what are you going to do?" and I was like, "You know, we're going to hold down the fort, we're going to push through it, and we're going to be loud about it, and we're going to be very direct and intentionally about this and why it matters and why it matters that we here at Montgomery in particular set the standard" and it's just one that I didn't think in mid-2014 or somewhere 2015 that we'd be having a discussion and it was a moment that I'm proud.

That one, initially idea what was right, and then two, I'm glad that even after friends, even after friends and supporters say, "Okay. Well, hey, you did that but you know, do you really have to embrace it so much? Do you really have to carry this banner of the LGBTQ+ you know and same-sex marriage?" And I was like, "Yeah, we have to do that, and here's why, and here's why it's not okay just to be silent on the matter, and here's why it's not okay just to kind of be meek and mild when it comes to moments like this."

Because you have to meet resistance where it is and you have to push back and I think that is something, again, it goes back to our parents and being taught or being around activism my whole life and that was kind of the activist side, kind of pushing back on this notion that, "No, we're just going to go by the law" Yeah, we're going to do that too but we're also going to make sure that Montgomery and Alabama reconcile where they are and how we're trying to move things forward to bring out more equality for everyone.

[0:37:55.2] LW: Do you feel like going against convention in that one incident gave yourself permission to become your own politician, your own person to proceed in your own way by your own moral compass?

[0:38:09.0] SR: Yeah, that's a great question. Yes, I think so. I know that after that and I kind of talk about it in the book when there's more and more, say he's going to rest all of these judges, right? Remove as well, I had to do a double take. I was like, "He can't remove us, can he? But let me just double-check the code of Alabama you know, that's here on my shelf." At that time, I was all and more importantly as I kind of shared in the book when I talked to Sherriff Derrick Cunningham and I said, "Hey."

You know, just more, you know some I remove those from the book, you know, I got to get you running on those looks, like a side-eye, whatever and I don't know what layers I can use but Sherriff Cunningham is running those here. Let me just put it like that. He uses very strong language and basically was he like, "That ain't happening here" and that is what he said. He was like and I was, "I wish he would come down here, we'll show him no matter what."

And you know, that also, having been again a colleague, Sherriff Cunningham was the first Black Sherriff in Montgomery's history, Montgomery County's history, and people don't know how powerful the Sherriff's office is in most states not just the South but the Midwest, all the way out, the Sherriff is an immensely, immensely powerful, if not high-profile position. Sometimes, we kind of mix up profile for power.

It is not always equated there but I think having someone in that position say, "I got your back" also kind of fortified me and to make those decisions that, "No, this is not the time. We're going to move this forward."

[BREAK]

[0:39:54.3] LW: And then later, you ran for mayor. What was the difference in running for mayor versus running for probate judge from a, again, real-world grassroots perspective?

[0:40:02.9] SR: Yeah.

[0:40:03.4] LW: I know you were the favored and you ended up winning by 67% of the vote but did you find that you had to run harder? Was it did not put as much effort into it or how did that change?

[0:40:13.4] SR: I thought I had to run hard against, you know, to prove myself, one, as my own person but also that I was ready for the position. It is one of those things where I kind of look back and to me, I should have run even earlier before then but again, I trust that the path has been laid before me but running for mayor was much more visible and I didn't realize at the time what it meant symbolically not with the people who are in Montgomery, the people who were not from Montgomery.

And I think that's kind of when I learned a little bit more appreciation in Montgomery's history in the country, not as a big city but as a historic city because of the not only the bus boycott, it meant as far as to you and your family who missed a part and went to place then but the selling of Montgomery march for voting rights, what all that meant at that time to generations of Black people and white Americans as well.

I learned that as I was running for mayor just the emotion that people had and this is going to sound crazy part and you and your listeners but I had so many people, I mean, so many people here talk about the emotion they felt like it was similar to President Obama's winning. I'm thinking to myself again, that's presidential level, we're just talking about mayor here but for people on the ground and for local people that or people that had ties here, their parents, grandparents were now from this area from the state, it meant a lot.

It was almost like this last passion that had to be conquered, right? So, running there was pressure but it was a profound joy for me because I really felt like that was prepared for, I had practiced for it and I was embracing the challenge that I would see once we got in here to be able to quarterback the city, to bring about change, and to really be able to put my finger on the scale if you will to right some wrongs that had never been done before.

[0:42:17.3] LW: So, let me ask you this, I'm inviting you to be transparent here, okay?

[0:42:22.3] SR: Yeah.

[0:42:22.9] LW: We've all felt imposter syndrome, okay?

[0:42:25.3] SR: Oh, yeah.

[0:42:26.6] LW: You win mayor of Montgomery. To what extent do you feel – I mean, you walked into the office, you've never been a mayor in any city before like do you feel like I don't – "What the fuck? How do I even do this?" Like initially, it was first like few weeks, like what is that like to win the mayor of such a historic place and story incidents happening, good and bad, what is that like?

[0:42:50.7] SR: It is almost like you're watching a Netflix series or something that's out there. You kind of view this as some kind of outside-in, right? Like it was drama and you're just kind of amazed at what happens next and no, you don't feel like – I remember when the guys came to pick me up like they had two or three SUVs, they came to pick me, and my wife and kids up, mentally it was just like different.

I mean, overwhelming and then you get into the office and it has so many people, grocery stores, church, you know, ball games, just running out of quick errands to the dry cleaners or you know, picking up some food or whatever, so many people ask for your picture, telling you thank you or congratulations. Man, it was amazing and the feeling really that got them to start to settle in, this is in weeks, not months but in weeks was responsibility.

Like, “Whoa, okay. Now, you’re in this place, now you do not have to mess it up.” I mean, not mess it up but you want to make sure that you make it right and where do you start there and who’s who, and kind of where do you go. So, it’s a real different feeling and you know, kind of be watched and know that people are watching you but also that I tell people is as many critics as they are, man, you have so many people who are praying for you and pushing for you, who will help me, and I mean that outweighs the negativity.

I’ve been hearing from so many people and again, you have been from here, growing up with a political family, and I kind of shared this in the book, I didn’t realize what becoming the first Black mayor here meant to so many people and again, I’ve talked to famous athletes, famous entertainers, very, very wealthy billionaires, I am amazed at what this has meant symbolically to people who I would never think would know my name, would know anything about me long before I even thought about writing a book.

And what looked and view this place as somewhat you know sacred ground, that’s something to look at. You know, I still kind of wrestle with, you know I still have to kind of check myself, and when I go to a Spellhouse homecoming or go to Howard University and hanging out, you know it feels good to kind of get that be brought back down to earth literally by your frat brothers and your friends and the guys you knew when because you kind of needed that.

Because sometimes, you can get caught in this kind of surreal space and I got to share this story, I was in Martha’s Vineyard this summer and I was reading about you know, President Obama’s coming here for the first time and obviously, they lived, they have a house there now and they weren’t you know when I was there but it was just fascinating. When I was just kind of thinking, I was like, “You know, whatever I have but I cannot imagine what this man and his wife and family must have felt with the country and the world.”

Like I cannot imagine in that way, in that level of weight but also just the level of interest in everything like you know, you pick up a hamburger [inaudible 0:46:04.8] he is eating a hamburger, you know? You go out and you're wearing some type of you know, dad jeans, somebody joking on your jeans, and just you know, just whatever it is, right? And I was like, that is different. It's a lot of responsibility but it's also I think one that you never probably get used to.

And so you need that circle of friends who kind of here to kind of check you a little bit and bring things back into focus so you could continue doing what people want and are looking for you to do it in your role. So, it's been a tremendous ride, yeah.

[0:46:38.7] LW: Yeah, you're part of a group chat of other mayors. What is that like? What are you guys talking about in this group chat?

[0:46:44.0] SR: Oh, man.

[0:46:45.4] LW: If the group chat got leaked, what would we see?

[0:46:48.1] SR: If the group chat got leaked, what would you see? Definitely, there is a façade of what is that, you know, leader of big cities, major cities but you know, we're interested in what Drake's new release sounds like, you know, want to know, "Okay, how much did you wife or your lady friend spent on her Beyonce tickets?" you know, we make fun of one another and we kind of hold each other in a space where we can all be ourselves.

But at the same time, we're there to support one another. You know, somebody has them happening in their city or somebody has something that you know, maybe challenging, we were there to kind of uplift one another and the thing that we talk about now is how again, how blessed and fortunate we are because the previous generation of Black man that came after the movement didn't know what they were up against.

And so we talk about those guys that came in the late 60s and the early 70s and the fact that "Okay, we at least have that model of what to do, you know, what not to do, and how to do it." They didn't have that and the communities didn't always understand or appreciate that, what

this power structure is, how it's made up in this country and so our group chat, man, is one that it's going to be lighthearted.

And somebody made fun of my picture on the book cover and, "What was Reed thinking then?" and fill in the little thought bubble but at the same time, we encourage one another to be bold and to be unapologetic in our quest for change and that we realize we stand on the shoulders of many who came before us but that our folks in our community are looking to us as their peers to bring about that substance of change and there can't be enough that we can do to help our folks in our respective cities and communities.

[0:46:48.1] LW: You open the book with a bunch of ideologies and philosophies that you learned from your father, stuff like, "Watch what people do rather than listen to what they say." I don't know if he said this but you mentioned, "History never marches in a straight line, it zigzags. Keep guiding the forefront, pray, and don't be embarrassed to ask them to pray for you because you'll need it."

And so I'm curious, you have two sons just like your father had two sons, and if you could leave for them a word of wisdom that you did get from your dad, what would that word of wisdom be for your sons?

[0:49:20.3] SR: Yeah, you know in the book, as much as it is a memoir, it is kind of a note or text thread to this Gen Z, Millennial generation to understand as I share with my young professional counsel here that I didn't just start in the suit and in the office, right? I started outside the hall, you know passing out the low program in the agenda, and then I would come in and clean up after the real meeting was had.

So you know, it comes in steps and it doesn't come overnight and you aren't always clear on where you're going. You got to have that faith, you got to have that belief for yourself to be successful, and I'll just share with both of my sons, last week something I said, "You know if you strive to be successful and you know build good habits, if you have good character, and you do the right thing, and you treat people well, more often than not, things will work out for you."

It may not work out for you when or where or how you think it will work out for you but it will work out for you because I share with them and I share with young people all the time, I did not want to go into politics. I talk about that in the book, I did not plan to do anything I'm doing now but I certainly appreciate the fact that I've gotten this opportunity because it is rewarding to do things beyond just the profit that I talked about because I was one who was focused on, "What's my sign in bonus going to be? What's my annual bonus going to be?"

"How much is the salary? What's the compensation?" you know, all those things and I have never hit any of those great metrics that 20 years ago, the 20-year-old version of me thought I would be focused on but yet, I think the work that I've done, the service that I put in has been as if not more rewarded anything I could made and I've gone on Wall Street, I've been a partner in this firm or whatever it may be and I try to tell my sons that you set that blueprint.

That standard that the fact that you want to be the very best at whatever you commit your time to, whether it's art, whether that's coding, whether it's gaming, whether it's sports, whether it's the bane, whether it's school clubs, whatever it may be, said it that you want to be the best and then develop the habits to get there and even if it is not here, it is not over there, it's more than likely going to work out in a way that it's beneficial to you and others and that would be what I would share with Gen Z and millennials.

But also, what I would share even with our peers is I think we all need to self-assess every now and then and be aware of who we think we are and who other people think we are.

[0:52:00.0] LW: What would you say your life mission is?

[0:52:03.0] SR: I think you know, my life mission is to really make transformative change for people of all backgrounds and ethnicities or races, who have felt like they wouldn't see it, they wouldn't quite get it. One of the things I'm most proud of in my political career is increasing the funding for our public school, something that never got voted around before and I did in my first year in office.

But it's one thing that I share in the book, I brought it up to our leadership probably ten years before we did it, 2010 before I was even in office and then I brought it up again when I ran for

probate judge. I just didn't have the control to do it and that's one of the things that kind of inspired me to run for mayor because I couldn't really get the outcome that I wanted.

So, I want to – my mission is to create a type of outcome that long after I'm gone in this office and hopefully, long after I'm gone from this earth, there would be people who would know and see that yeah, there is a name on the wall and there's somebody that served, he was somebody that leads us to a special place that benefited many, many others in a way that no one else had and had done in that time.

And I just want to make sure that I don't get too focused on myself, even with this book that I forget what the real mission is and the real mission is to bring about substantive change that helps people in a tangible way that they can feel and that they can see and they can hear and the symbolism matters but the substance matters even more and that doesn't always gel with great politics.

It doesn't always gel with if you want to be popular but when you are committed to doing what's right and you're committed to make a difference, it is easy to reconcile the two.

[0:54:00.3] LW: Beautiful, man. Well, congratulations on your first book, which is called, *First, Best: Lessons in Leadership and Legacy from Today's Civil Rights Movement*, and it's an honor having you back on the show and I can't wait to get a chance to connect in person again very soon.

[0:54:16.6] SR: Oh man, likewise. Listen, I just want to say thank you for the opportunity and for reaching out. You've got a great audience and we hope that they enjoy the book. There are some plenty of stories there too, it's not all serious but I think there are some lessons, some takeaways, where all of us regardless of age and stage and it's not just a political book.

It really is to me about that life's work and what those elders shared with us and what we learned from them versus how we apply it now and now we would come into that season of life, how we can kind of leave some of those breadcrumbs for those who's coming behind us to really advance their calls and mission, whatever they may be. So, it's been great talking with you, brother.

Always appreciate you, and I appreciate the friendship, and everything that you do, and things you shared and things you taught us through our friendship over the years. Just know that it didn't go unnoticed and just know it's value for me. I just appreciate all the love and support, brother.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:55:21.7] LW: Thank you for tuning in to my interview with Mayor Steven Reed. You can follow Mayor Reed on the socials @steven, which is S-t-e-v-e-n, Louis, L-o-u-i-s, Reed, R-e-e-d, and his book, *First, Best*, is available everywhere books are sold and of course, I'll put links to it in the show notes as well, which you can always find at lightwatkins.com/podcast.

And if you enjoyed our conversation and you found it inspiring, and now you're thinking to yourself, "Wow, I would love to hear Light interview someone like Oprah" here's how you can make that interview happen, right? Because I reach out to a lot of people like Oprah, I haven't actually reached out to Oprah yet but people like Oprah all the time and I invite them onto the podcast, and what typically happens is their gatekeepers receive the invitation and then they go and they vet whether or not this is a podcast that will be worth that person's time.

So, they go to the page and they look and they see how many ratings does this podcast have, how many reviews does it have, and if they can see that people are engaged in that way by rating and reviewing the podcast, then the chances of them saying, "Okay, this would be a great platform for someone like Oprah" are so much higher than if they go there and they just see crickets.

So, that's why you hear podcasters like me always saying please leave a review, that's the best way you can support the podcast. It's absolutely free, it takes less than 10 seconds, all you do is you glance down at your screen, you click on the name of the show, The Light Watkins Show, you scroll down past those first seven episodes, you'll see a space with five blank stars. Just click the star on the right, and you've left us a five-star rating.

If you want to go the extra mile, write one line about what you appreciate about this podcast and that's it. In that way, you've cast your vote for guests appearing on shows like this one and also, don't forget that we have YouTube channel, where you watch the podcast episodes. If you ever want to put a face to a story and all you do is go to YouTube.com and you type in Light Watkins Podcast and you'll see the whole playlist and I also post the raw, unedited version of every podcast in my Happiness Insiders online community.

So, 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 the episodes, you can listen to all of that by joining my online community at thehappinessinsiders.com, and other than that, I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with another story about somebody just like me or someone just like you, who took a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose or they pivoted away from something that they didn't like to something that lift their heart up inside and it's always an inspiring story.

So, until then, please keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart, and by all means, keep taking those leaps of faith on your end, and if no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. So, thank you very much, sending you lots of love, and have a great day.

[END]