



THE BARTLEYS INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON THREE

Lawrence Bartley, Publisher
Ronnine Bartley, Educator
June 26, 2023
Interviewed by: Teddy Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 43 minutes and 41 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT: Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I didn't have the luxury to be crestfallen. I didn't have the luxury to be down on my luck. I had to figure it out because prison is like a paramilitary organization and you don't want to offend anybody or get into a physical altercation. It was just so much more to consider and I didn't have the luxury to worry, to cry, to ask for help. I just had to figure it out.

00:00:34:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

You really, really have to educate yourself on someone being institutionalized and you have to have a tremendous amount of empathy and you really have to be patient. Even though their body is free, a lot of their mind is still institutionalized and that is something that will probably never go away.



Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

Lawrence Bartley

Publisher, The Marshall Project

Ronnine Bartley

Educator

00:01:18:00

CREW:

Bartley interview take one, marker.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you so much for being here, appreciate it.

00:01:26:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Thank you.

RONNINE BARTLEY:

No problem, of course.

INTERVIEWER:

Can you please just introduce yourself?

RONNINE BARTLEY:

My name is Ronnine. I like to put the Simmons-Bartley. I'm a teacher and a dean to middle school kids.

00:01:37

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

My name is Lawrence Bartley. I'm the publisher of the Marshall Project Inside.

00:01:41:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about what the Marshall Project is.

00:01:43:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

The Marshall Project is a non-profit, non-partisan news organization that reports on a criminal justice system. We've only been around for about eight years and we're the youngest organization to ever win a Pulitzer Prize and we won two in eight years. So I'm really proud of the work that we're able to do.

00:02:03:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

Well, thank God for the Marshall Project, okay? I'll say that first. He was already a great person but it has made him an even better person. I think they do amazing work and I'm happy that he's just a part of the organization.

00:02:21:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

When I joined the Marshall Project, one of the first things I was tasked with is... Looking at our website to get familiar with it. I had just seen the internet for the first time maybe two months prior. I noticed that we had this robust criminal justice news that would have been something I could have used to move the courts in my case. I wish that I had that on the inside so I could think of ways that I can get it back to the people who were still behind the wall, and I had a lot of friends back there. And I knew I couldn't go back to visit them all, but what I could do is I could create this print publication called *News Inside*, which I curated the articles that I felt that would have been super helpful to incarcerated people, and I packaged it in a way that prison administrators would allow it in.

00:03:22:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

And now *News Inside* is distributed in about over 950 prison jails across the country in 44 states. DC, Canada and Tijuana, Mexico. Some students at Columbia University just did a study of what is *News Inside*? How can it be more efficient? And doing that they came across some research that found that three out of five incarcerated people have some literacy issues. So that posed a problem for *News Inside* because if you can't read our information

you're not getting it. It was a colleague of mine who was incarcerated. And he got released and he was executive assistant and he would moonlight doing video on the side. We filmed some episodes and we would call on some reporters and ask them about their stories and record them on Zoom, and it became a successful video series that had one season and it aired in over 750 prisons and jails across 40 states as well as the public.

00:04:25:00

INTERVIEWER:

Before we jump into what life is like on the inside, can you tell me what life was like when you were a boy growing up?

00:04:32:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I grew up to two parents that were emigrated from Guyana, which is in South America. I characterized my parents as blue collar workers. They worked really hard to make a life for myself, my sister and my younger brother. And things were fine for my childhood for the most part.

00:04:51:00

INTERVIEWER:

How old were you when you and Lawrence met?

00:04:53:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:



I met him when I was in the seventh grade. So I was probably 12, maybe turning 13, I'm assuming. We both grew up in Southern Queens. We were both living in middle-class neighborhoods. He was in Laurelton and I was in St. Albans. Walking distance it's like 10 minutes away.

00:05:14:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I went to middle school with her cousin and that's how we met. And we met through a friend of mine, and we became cordial to one another.

00:05:23:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

Amazingly enough, I found out that he had a crush on me. He just seemed like a sweet little boy to me. I guess I was more mature for my age or at least I thought I was. He still had the same characteristics that he has now. So he was very honest, open, and he had like this kind spirit about him. And I guess that's what kind of got me to start liking him a little bit.

00:05:51:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

It evolved into a puppy love relationship and we stayed that way. We thought we were together for such a long time. It was eight months. It felt like eight years. At 14, things started to get tough. My parents got a divorce and my household was split up. My brother and I went to live with my dad and my



sister stayed with my mom. I found myself spending time at the two different households.

00:06:22:00

INTERVIEWER:

Something happened on the intersection of 150th Street and 89th Avenue. Can you tell me what happened?

00:06:28:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Well, that's a place where I used to hang out a lot with my friends. But one day I was hanging out and I was 16 years old and it was maybe about 12 of us, boys and girls. And I remember I was sitting on the beach chair and I had a bottle of orange juice in my hand and a motorcycle came by and a person on the back just started shooting into the crowd. Unfortunately, I was hit four times and I went to the hospital. At 16, I nearly lost my life. I think it was the first time I had seen my dad cry.

00:07:09:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

We were definitely on different paths. Not that either one of us was on the greatest path, but I would speak to him intermittently at times. We weren't living in the nice, cute, middle class neighborhood anymore. It was like we had people running in our backyards. For what? I guess people buying crack, people running from the police, I don't know. But literally, you could be like

walking to your door and somebody could be coming from your backyard and it's like, what the heck is going on?

00:07:46:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

After being shot, I felt like someone would come out of a corner and shoot me at any moment. I didn't want my back to people anymore. I would be really skittish until someone told me that you should carry a gun. You should carry your gun to protect yourself. I believe during that time, there's over 2,000 murders in New York City, which is the highest it has ever been. So living in that environment and knowing that... knowing that no one is gonna save you or help you, I felt that the gun was the only thing that was gonna help me.

00:08:27:00

INTERVIEWER:

Now it's Christmas, 1990, you're 17. What happened?

00:08:33:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Well, you know, that very gun I had, I had it for my protection. And with that, I noticed that you have to have some level of... bravado. You have to present yourself in a certain way where individuals won't harm you. Having that gun gave me that confidence to do that. One night I was in a movie theater and we were watching a movie. I think a group of kids came in making noise, yelling. One of the individuals with me told him to be quiet, used an expletive and



arguing, it ensued back and forth. And then they started shooting at us. I was definitely scared. But it was not again.

00:09:33:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

You know, it was like, it just has happened over and over. It's so much gunfire that I'd been around, heard. I wanted to get away from the situation. I didn't wanna shoot anyone. So in my haste in processing everything so quickly, I looked, I didn't see anything, so I fired a shot. And I made my way out of the theater. Ugh, that was one of the worst moments of my life, just hearing that someone was shot. It was a boy that was in pretty bad shape. It was pressing on me, it was crushing. I was really worried.

00:10:18:00

INTERVIEWER:

And how did you find out he did die?

00:10:21:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

On the news shortly after I found out he did die.

00:10:25:00

INTERVIEWER:

When you got arrested, it wasn't for murder, it was for having a gun. How did they find out you had a gun and your gun matched the bullet?

00:10:34:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

They never find that my gun, my bullet matched anything. DNA evidence wasn't like it was today. Ballistics wasn't what we know it to be today. I was charged with gun possession and reckless endangerment. I wasn't charged with murder because it was two individuals shooting. They didn't know who did what. It wasn't until six months later when I was indicted that the charge increased to murder. The theory was that we acted in concert, both groups, to create a dangerous situation in which someone lost their lives. They call it depraved indifference for human life. So it didn't matter, you know, according to the law and according to the trial theory who shot the individual. But in regards to the bullet that I had that was attributed to the gun that I was using, it wasn't any matter, it wasn't any blood, it wasn't any bodily fluids on the bullet. A bullet was found, it was nearly intact.

00:11:34:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

But what the district attorney tried to illustrate is that where the bullet was found in proximity to the deceased, that it could have been the gun, they called it, and they said it was likely. I haven't proven this, but it seems like it was easier to make that case. It's still important because I would like to know who shot the individual. I really would like to know that it wasn't me, not that I wanted to blame it on anyone else, but it's something tough to live with, just not knowing. Also, it doesn't escape me, the gravity of what I was involved in, you know, that caused someone their life. So it doesn't absolve me from

responsibility in my mind. When you discuss the truth, when you discuss accountability, I like the whole truth. It has to be all of it.

00:12:42:00

INTERVIEWER:

The other group that was firing at you guys, did they find them? Did anything happen?

00:12:46:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Never. To this day, I don't know who they are. They know who they are, but I don't know. No one knows, that I know.

00:12:55:00

INTERVIEWER:

Yet the DA said you worked in concert with them.

00:12:58:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Yeah. I was really at the mercy of the state, and it was like very easy to convict me.

00:13:05:00

INTERVIEWER:

When she did send you to, how long did she sentence you to prison?

00:13:09:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

She sentenced me to 27 and a third years of life. It's 27 years and four months to be exact. And it was tough. It was like, really? Someone was shooting at me. I fired one shot back. There was 25 shots fired. How can I be the one this whole thing is pinned on? I was young. When you're young, you can't fathom long-term consequences. It's like, no, that's not gonna happen to me. The most horrible thing you can get in my mind was 25 years of life, but I got two more years than that. So it was like what? Wait, what? It was horrible.

00:13:51:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

When I heard 27 years to life, thinking about it just brings back horrible memories, and I just remember bursting out in tears, and I called his mother. And when I called his mom, she was like hysterical, and we were both like screaming and crying on the phone with each other and not knowing what to do. And so maybe the next day or next few days, I went to see him. We weren't together. We weren't dating all of this time. I was just being like that supportive friend, and maybe one day it'll work out in the future. But I just remember me saying to him, we were supposed to get married. I can't wait 27 years. He was just so calm about it, wiping my tears away. Mind you, I'm not the one that just got sentenced with 27 years to life, and I felt like what my life could have been was no more. It was over.

00:14:59:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I went to a maximum security prison, and I remained in maximum security prisons for the next 27 years.

00:15:09:00

INTERVIEWER:

How did you figure out how to survive in prison?

00:15:14:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

It was figuring it out with people who look like me, who were my age, who have similar time. We would gravitate towards each other, and the elder gentleman, we knew not to trust immediately. We were just like, we're not gonna trust anyone. It took quite, I mean, about a year and a half while I was settled into a maximum security facility before I was able to trust an adult. I just had my peers.

00:15:45:00

INTERVIEWER:

And once he is assigned to prison, I believe you were the first visitor upstate.

00:15:50:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

I probably didn't know that at the time, but I remember being 19 and me going up to see him, and I mean, I guess at that age, like you're fearless, you're



not thinking about what to wear to prison, what to bring on the bus with you, because I took the bus up there. The visit was awkward, I guess. I had never visited a prison before. I didn't know what to expect or how to be, or I didn't know if I could touch or — I didn't know that you couldn't touch them or be too close or anything like that.

00:16:34:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

We traded letters and we talked on the phone, but it was infrequent. She went on and lived her life, and I was dealing with the incarceration.

00:16:45:00

INTERVIEWER:

When Christmas would come around, did you celebrate Christmas?

00:16:48:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Absolutely, there was a Christmas spirit. Folks look for things to celebrate in order to cope, and during Christmas or any of the big holidays, people who were close together, they would cook together, they would get things from the commissary that they can use in order to make bills. It would take hours to cook, so people who had good relationships with each other, each other, they worked. Chip in to buy little pieces of food, whether it's the seasoning, the drinks, or whatever, and it was out early in the day, and once it's ready, someone's job would be to share the food in these little bowls, because we



didn't have plates, we didn't have utensils like you're used to. We had bowls with lids. They put it on the bowls and lids, and the person who shared it out, he would use a fishing line, which is a ripped piece of sheet, and then you put a weight on the end of it. Usually it's the soap.

00:17:48:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

You tie the soap on the end of it, and someone from up, throw the line out, and then someone would take a broom and put a paper clip on the ends of the broom to pull the line in with the soap, and then the person up top will put the bowl of food inside of a net bag and tie it on the line, and then say, go ahead, pull, push it out the bars, and you pull it down, and you get your food, and everyone get their food at the same time. So now we can eat, and people would eat, and people will be really happy.

00:18:17:00

INTERVIEWER:

This joyous time, though, was it hard since Christmas was the anniversary of the movie theater?

00:18:23:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Yeah, it was hard. It was always a constant reminder of why I was there, because one thing in prison, I've seen people succumb to a lot of misery if they dwell on who doesn't come visit them, what could have been, what their

crime was, what money I don't have, or who on the other end is not taking care of me. A lot of folks I know didn't make it. So the best way to survive is to live in the moment. So during the holidays, I would try my best to just think about the bowl of food that's in front of me.

00:19:05:00

INTERVIEWER:

Did the sameness, day in and day out, ever break your spirits or challenge your sanity?

00:19:12:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

No, I mean, it would try. It would try, but I didn't allow it to. While I was inside, first thing I did was sign up for college. I went into college courses, and in my mind, I was trying to be where my peers on the outside would be, and I threw my everything into that. I mean some folks would — I would go to the yard after school, they was like, you go to school every day, they would say, what do you want to be, a doctor, a lawyer? You're in prison, what? I was just like, I just want to go to school. And you know, I got some joy out of that, but then the 1994 crime bill came around, and they pulled Pell grants from people who are in prisons and jails. You know, they felt that taxpayers paying money for people to commit crimes and then go to prison and get degrees. Bill Clinton said, no, we're gonna pull it. I was really angry. I was like, so, you know, college is done. Like, I remember questioning, what's the system for

us? So they want us to be monsters, they want to be not educated. This is what they want from us.

00:20:20:00

INTERVIEWER:

And how many years went by until you were able to get access to an education?

00:20:25:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Oh. College education would be 16 years before I could get it. So in between what I would do is I would find different programs to be a part of. Someone gave me an opportunity to be in aggression replacement training, which was ART. And then once you take that, you can become a facilitator, which you like teach in class. And it was important to people who were going to the parole board who had a violent crime. They had to complete, I think it was eight weeks of ART in order to go. So I felt that I had an important job because I was helping people get what they needed to go home. And New York is one of, I believe, four states that has family reunion visits where you can spend some time with your family outside of, you know, a prison guard's presence. And in order to qualify for that, if a person had a violent crime, they had to go through ART.

00:21:26:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:



So it meant a really lot to them and to be the one that's giving it to them. I found a lot of value in that. And the counselor that was running it all would look at me for leadership. So she thought I was doing a good job. I was able to see myself through her eyes and that gave me a bit of confidence, like, well, I can stand in front of a group of people and have a conversation and be helpful. And so I did that for a while. And then that kind of spurred me on to do other things. And that's what got me through until I got to college.

00:21:59:00

INTERVIEWER:

How did you get news on the outside when you were incarcerated?

00:22:04:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

We didn't have access to internet. Most places didn't have access to any computer of any kind until the latter years of my incarceration. And even those computers were antiquated, like, it was like 10 years old. But the way we would get news is we would get what we can glean from television. But also the TV's on schedule, being it's a community TV. It's like, you can't watch news all day. You have to catch it at the certain times. It was very tough to get, you know, print like newspapers and magazines. It was possible if you had family support who can pay for it. But most people came from impoverished communities or working class communities. So their families couldn't afford a pricey newspaper or magazine subscription. The main source of news in that regard would come from the correctional staff. They couldn't hand us



newspapers or a magazine, but what they would do is they would throw it in the garbage. And when they weren't looking, we would fish it out the garbage, and then there would be a line of 10 people for one newspaper. And by the time you got it, the news was old, obviously, but it still was better than nothing.

00:23:15:00

INTERVIEWER:

How did you sustain relationships with your loved ones when you were on the inside?

00:23:21:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I didn't want to be a burden to anyone. I understood that. I didn't think that my indictment meant that everyone I loved had to change their life in order to take care of me. So I knew that I was away. So I didn't expect that of anyone or ask anyone to do that. But if anyone came to see me, I definitely was appreciative. My dad would come visit me maybe once a year, regularly. And he would... Send me money once a month. So that was constant. That never ended. My grandmother would send me money once a month until — And write me letters once a month until she began to develop Alzheimer's and I could tell when her letters would change. And then they would stop coming. But that was mainly what got me through.

00:24:20:00



RONNINE BARTLEY:

Between 1995-ish and 2004, I believe, a lot happened. My mom started to put her foot down. It was like, you need to do something with your life. So I eventually graduated from college. I became an educator. And I would keep in touch with him and promise to visit, but I never really did because life happened.

00:24:46:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

It wasn't until she wrote me a letter in 2004-ish. She had been through a series of relationships and she had said that I've been through a life and I only have one soulmate and that soulmate is you. I know that you are away, but I wanna at least come see you. If you mind, it's been many years. Can I come visit? I was like, sure, of course I want a visit.

00:25:17:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

I was very unhappy and Lawrence was somebody that you could talk to very easily. He'll snap you back into reality and push you to be your best self. He was always great at that. And I guess that's one of the reasons why I really held him very dear to my heart as a friend because he was always very honest, but encouraging at the same time. I made that promise to him that no matter what happened from this point, I'm never gonna leave him again. Even if it's in friendship, that's fine with me, but I promise that I will never, ever,



ever leave him, again. And of course I cried and that was it. I never left. From 2004 of April, I've never left since then.

00:26:06:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

We both had grown up quite a bit and for the last 14 years of my incarceration, she came to visit me once a week.

00:26:15:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

I don't know who came up with the idea, but we were like, let's just keep writing until the letters catch up so that we're both receiving a letter every day. And that way I can make it through, you can make through.

00:26:28:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

To get mail every day and look forward to a visit on a weekend, it really, really brought us close together. And I was lucky enough to have her and I was lucky enough to marry her. She said yes to someone like me who was in the worst possible situation you could be in.

00:26:47:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about the wedding.

00:26:49:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Well, we had a wedding inside of a prison visiting room. I had on a nice shirt, as nice as you could get during the time, with my prison pants on. She came in with a green dress that she bought for the ceremony, and she had her cousin and two nieces as witnesses. It wasn't a good place to be married, not ideal under anyone's standard, but we both blocked all that negativity out and what was most important was that we were standing face to face together and we were getting married, and that meant more to us than anything else. It meant that we were having a life together. And to me, it meant a whole, whole lot because it was our stand convicted of a horrible crime inside of a prison where by many standards, no one is gonna check for me or even care about me. I went away at such a young age. I didn't have the same experiences as many people. I didn't live as an adult. I didn't do any of that. But for her to be willing to erase all that and say I wanna have a future with you, it meant a whole lot, a whole lot to me and I never forgot that.

00:28:09:00

INTERVIEWER:

It occurred on a specific day that she picked. Can you tell me what day that was and what the importance of it was?

00:28:14:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Yeah, she picked December 27th and that was the day I was arrested.

00:28:20:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

So instead of him thinking about that day that kind of messed up his life, I said let's do something that we can remember that can bring us some happiness.

00:28:35:00

INTERVIEWER:

And how was your family? Were they supportive of this relationship?

00:28:40:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

It's not that they were against it, but my mom just had the conversation with me like, okay, when he comes out, he's gonna have a felony and you know that there's already strikes against him for being a Black person. So I don't know what he's going to do being a Black person and having a felony, but you have to understand that this is not going to be something that is easy.

00:29:09:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about the family reunion program. I assume this could start right after your wedding.

00:29:14:00



LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

No, actually it starts maybe if you're lucky a year and a half after. You get on a cycle and it's about a 90 day cycle and you could just keep going out as long as you're at the facility. It was great, you know, we were able to watch TV together, we could cook together, we were able to sit down outside together. We eventually had children which was a huge blessing and it was worthy of another story in itself.

00:29:42:00

INTERVIEWER:

What struck me with your oldest son Lawrence Jr. was the story of his birth. Can you tell me about that?

00:29:47:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Yeah, he was born premature. He was born weighing one pound, eight ounces and there was a lot of other children who was in the NICU at the time, and if there were eight children, there were only two that survived throughout the whole two, three month ordeal, and my son was the smallest of all of them. Thinking of your own child's mortality, that was, it was really tough and I couldn't be there for them at all. But I would call my wife every day and she would be outside of the little clear basket that my son was in and she'd put her hands in through these gloves or whatever to touch him and she would like put the phone so he could hear my voice. It was limited phones inside the facility, but a lot of the men around me, they would give up their phone time



so I could use the phone and usually prison staff, they don't allow that. People using the phone more than their share.

00:30:48:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

They think that you're taking advantage of others, but word soon got around what I was going through and they was like let Bartley use the phone. I remember I was wearing a t-shirt. I was wearing a t- shirt for days and then wrapping it up and staff letting me send it out to my wife, the t- shirt and she would wrap my son in it and so he would get used to my scent to know that somebody else got his back in this besides my wife.

00:31:15:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

He made it, he was hospitalized three months after he was born and I'm not a religious person by any means at all, but I mean God and those doctors and nurses saved my son. I probably brought him to see Lawrence maybe in March or April. He looked like he was like a month old and he was a couple of months old and he was just so small. When you look through the pictures, but you can just see like Lawrence's face against little Lawrence's his face and he was just like so totally overjoyed. It was good, it was good to see.

00:31:57:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Having him with me and knowing that he made it out to be outside in the world, it was a big moment for me. It was a moment for him, it was big

moment for our family. I was there for the children on the phone, I would see them during visits but she was there for the day to day.

00:32:15:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

Half a single parent is what I like to call myself.

00:32:18:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I would save my money throughout the year in order to make sure the kids had Christmas gifts. It's something that I always did for my two boys, my daughter throughout my entire incarceration, never missing a year but being together was our time to be a family without anyone watching over us. I felt like that was my freedom. That was my only sense of freedom. That caused me to kind of reflect on what my life was like and it was sad when you thought of it, but it was all I had. And it was beautiful to me.

00:32:49:00

INTERVIEWER:

Were you concerned bringing the boys into prison?

00:32:53:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

No, because they were young, I guess when you're doing something almost every weekend, you don't really know that you're visiting your father in

prison. They didn't really hear about mass incarceration or people being incarcerated. When we went on visits, it was just like, oh, we're going to Dad's house, right? So the weekend visits were just the normal routine and the correctional officers, they knew us. For the most part, most of them were nice, not all, but it was like a mini adventure and me and Lawrence would come up with like themes for every trailer, like Halloween, bring in the makeup and we would make up our faces and we would go trick-or-treating.

00:33:37:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

I would buy a lot of candy from commissary and we'd go out on Family Reunion, there's five other people, families that go out with you. So I would go and I would tell the men in there, I was like, listen, can I give you this candy? Because I'm gonna have my children knock on your door and we're gonna go trick-or-treating. And they said, okay, that's cool. And they had fun, we made something out of nothing and those are memories that they still remember to this day and I remember. You know, it kind of saves your life going forward, just not taking no for an answer, just trying to find another option.

00:34:12:00

INTERVIEWER:

So I believe it was around 25 years in, you were up for parole. Can you talk about the first time you were eligible?

00:34:20:00



LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Well, after 27 years, I was up for parole. I was eligible. And two years before that, I started preparing my parole packet in which you highlight your accomplishments, you tell your story, you have photographs in there, you might have certificates, your degrees in there. It's just a packet in order to show the parole panel who you are. This is what I've been for the last 27 years. There was many things that I had done that folks thought earned my release, not to mention I was incarcerated at 17. So when I went before the parole board, I was denied. Well, after all that, they told me no.

00:35:03:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

When he had that first hearing, it was just a shock. Like, mentally, I checked out. I took a leave of absence from work. I couldn't help him fight because I couldn't fight for myself. I just totally lost it. And I just lost all hope. I lost all faith. I became very bitter. And I had a wake-up call about the criminal justice system. It was absolutely devastating. I can't think of another word to describe it.

00:35:35:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

After they denied me, there's a team of lawyers who filed a lawsuit using me as a named plaintiff against the New York State, saying that for them denying me parole is tantamount to giving me life without a parole. And I should have a reasonable opportunity to expect release, especially since I've

demonstrated that I'm someone that can stay at liberty without committing a crime based upon all the programs I've taken, created, and the lives that I helped on the inside.

00:36:08:00

INTERVIEWER:

And what happened on April 16th?

00:36:10:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

It was the first parole hearing I had had after the lawsuit was filed. So the parole board was well aware that here stands before me a person who was a named plaintiff on an interesting case that had the quasi-backing of the Supreme Court. And they handled me differently. Parole hearings usually take about 10 minutes, quick. Try to get your point of course, try to convince them. But it wasn't as quick. They listened to me. It lasted about 50 minutes. After that, I felt heard, I felt different. But I didn't get the decision until maybe 12 days later. So I had to wait on pins and needles. Like, did I make it? So, I remember a friend came to visit me and I was in the visiting room and then I saw the superintendent come in.

00:37:12:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

He was scanning the visiting room, I felt he was looking for me and we caught eye contact. He's like, come on. And I came up and he says, "Do you know when you're going home?" I was like, "No." He said, "Well I do." I'm like, "You



do?" He said, "Yeah. You go home in 36 hours." I was like, "36 hours?" I told my visit, goodbye. I went back to my cell, got unpacked. I was so happy. And I finally got out of there.

00:37:38:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

Him getting that decision finally, or rather me seeing other people fighting for him that didn't really know him, it kind of gave me that kick that I needed to get it together. Like, you have to stabilize yourself. There has to be some stability for you guys to kind of move on, right? Or to excel and progress in life.

00:38:04:00

INTERVIEWER:

As Lawrence prepared to reintegrate into society, did you receive any guidance or support of how to handle this?

00:38:09:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

No, absolutely not. And you have to think about... This can be a whole conversation on its own, which we need to advocate for a little more because you have so many people incarcerated, right? And a lot of them are coming home and you really don't know what to do. What their feelings are, how you're gonna feel, what to expect. It's like culture shock on both ends, right? When he first came home, it was not easy. He was trying to make his place. He



was tryna insert himself in and you know, he's a type A personality, but shit, excuse me, but I was out here. Like, I have to have a type-A personality, right. We have the emotional support from you, but I'm taking care of this family, right? The best way that I can. So it was really, really hard for him to assert, you know, like his position and like kinda how he fit in with us.

00:39:18:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

It was very, very difficult. Everybody doesn't have the communication skills that we have, that we're fortunate to have that, right? If we did not have that and if we did not know when to step away from each other, the marriage— We would've had all the love and the world for each other, but like Tina Turner's "What's Love Got To Do With It," it really is not what's gonna hold you together in a relationship. There's no support, there's no services. If there's no mental health services for people who have never been incarcerated, right, or impacted by incarceration, imagine the limitations that we have for people that are coming home and their families. And you really need some type of counseling coming out for both. It's something that is very necessary for people to survive.

00:40:14:00

INTERVIEWER:

And how was fatherhood when you did get out? Because now you're with your kids 24/7.

00:40:20:00



LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Um. I would say everything I thought it would be, it's about seven billion times better. It's just seeing your children every day and their hopes and their dreams and just doing whatever you can in order to help them. My youngest, he saw a Bruce Lee movie and he's like, "Oh, who's that? Oh, God, he's great, oh." He started loving Bruce Lee. So I put him in martial arts and he just excelled in martial arts. And my oldest son. He loves singing. So he worked at it. He asked me to put him in singing lessons. I put him to singing lessons, so he worked at it, worked at it, worked at it until he could hold a note. Then he could hold a note better. And then I saw this kid perform off Broadway. I saw him perform off on Broadway with others. I see him in the school choirs and he's singing, he's performing, he's dancing, he's doing the things that he loves to do.

00:41:19:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

And to see the joy in those kids and my daughter as well. She's an adult, she's navigating through life, trying to get her first property and to help in that, to think about it, to help her build a credit, and to do all those things that a father is supposed to do, that I missed for those 27 years, it feels priceless.

00:41:38:00

RONNINE BARTLEY:

It's just getting better and better and better. He does most of the work. I must say that he's done his part and more. It's time for me to catch up again now, like with the parenting, because he does like just about everything.

00:41:57:00

INTERVIEWER:

When your sons and your daughter watch this interview, what is the most important message they can take away from your story?

00:42:10:00

LAWRENCE BARTLEY:

Well. I would say it's an American story. And that, you know, people of color are disproportionately inside of prisons and jails. And it's for a number of reasons. Not that folks aren't accountable for some of the things that they do. That's not the reason, because we should be held accountable, but there's different socioeconomic factors that place people like me in neighborhoods that crime were pervasive in. Throughout it all, no matter what happened, if there's odds against you, if there are mistakes that you've made, there's triumphs, there's still more to do, there's still more go. And it's like having that no quit attitude is very important. If you also couple it with the ability to care for people and what they have going on, and try to understand their situations. People have different values, but there's somewhere in there, there's some type of alignment, and finding that and having the care inside you to look, to scrape through the surface, even though it's hard to find that, I think it's important. And I hope that they take that away from this interview.

END TC: 00:43:41