

MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, May 2023

Reuben Watson

Foster Care: A Story of Pain Becomes a Story of Empowerment and Grace



Reuben Watson is the Central Region Advancement Director of Sunrise Children’s Services, a nonprofit Christian ministry that provides care and hope for hurting families and children. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Reuben shares his story of experiencing foster homes, crisis units, mental hospitals, and battles with suicide and self-worth. Believing he was “too bad to love,” Reuben eventually found an organization and a loving family who adopted him as a teenager, which turned his life around. This interview can equip you with the tools to share hope with others.

WC: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to this incredible issue of MASTERS and I love the platform that I have to educate listeners. First of all, educating myself, because I do a lot of studying before I start interviewing these wonderful guests that I am privileged to get to know. I was introduced to this wonderful man, Reuben Watson, who—I’ll share a little bit more about who he is and the work that he does, but for me to sit down and educate myself about the foster care world and what that all means, and I tell you, it’s been a nice journey for me. And I’m grateful, not only to Reuben, but also I want to make mention of my good friend and partner Jeremy Teal, who—Jeremy is the one who introduced me to Reuben because of the work that they do there locally in Kentucky. And so, we have lots of things to share, but again, just thank you so much for giving me this platform, and Reuben, thank you so much for being here today.

RW: Absolutely, the pleasure’s all mine.

WC: So, let me—I’m going to read a lot of this. Reuben is the director of outreach and advancement at Sunrise Children’s Services, which serves families across Kentucky, providing foster care programs. He graduated from Eastern Kentucky University where he majored in communication studies. Reuben has spent his career learning how to give back and trying to empower others within his community, both in his current role and in his previous role as the volunteer and guest services manager at Ronald McDonald House, a name that most of us absolutely are aware of. I want to read a little bit about Sunrise Children’s Services. They provide care and hope for hurting families and children. I pulled this from the website, by the way. Sunrise Children’s Services has been at the forefront in the fight to protect Kentucky’s children since 1869. Yes, you heard me correctly, 1869. Because at the close of the Civil War, families in Kentucky were left devastated. And as a border state with torn loyalties, Kentucky saw families split and broken by the conflict. Death, sickness, and the poverty that

followed left many children orphaned with no one to care for them. So, today Sunrise is a home for children who have been abused and neglected, children whose lives have been scarred by unspeakable physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and who have been removed from their homes. From the president of the organization down to their direct care staff, their goal at Sunrise, every day, is to provide a place of refuge, of hope, of love, and of healing to these children whose lives have been devastated. For these children, Sunrise is a place where they can begin to feel safe, a place where they encounter adults who give them unconditional love, and a place where they can begin to learn that the world can be a good place. And there's so much more that I am hoping to share; things that I have learned about them by doing my research, including what's on your website there at Sunrise Children's Services. There were several stories that were told and I pulled some of those and maybe we'll be able to share some of them because I think that, for people to get involved, for people to want to engage their time and their money and their passion and their skills and their talents to make a difference, it's necessary to hear the personal stories. It's necessary to put a face on the cause, on the challenge, so to speak. So, again, Reuben, thank you so much for being here today and you obviously have a story to tell as well, which is probably what brought you to this work. So, again, welcome, Reuben.

RW: Well, thank you and thank you for doing an amazing job and making my job a little easier with doing all your research. And it is an honor, like I said before, and a pleasure to be able to share about my story and my connection to Sunrise but also to share the story of many others. And my hope is that, with an opportunity like this platform, like this, that others will become educated. They'll have understanding of what they can do within their own communities and ways they can serve and love and think through and really bring hope to the hopeless and help bring healing to our communities, which is in desperate need of healing, as you look at our children and the next generation. So, thank you.

WC: So, if you don't mind, I know that you experienced multiple foster homes, crisis units, mental hospitals, and battles with suicide, with your self-worth. Can you share with us your story?

RW: Absolutely. Well, you know, as we get into my story and get into the things that I've been through, I think it's important that anyone who hears this hopefully hears a story of hope and I hope that anyone who hears this sees it as an opportunity to overcome. And I hope that it challenges and encourages those who maybe come from broken homes, come from broken situations, and who may be in places of hopelessness: that they realize it is just a chapter of their story and that their story is not done being written yet. And so, I always want to tell people to be encouraged about my story. It's perfectly okay to be broken with me and walking through the brokenness as you hear some of my story but to be encouraged because the man that I am today is because of things that I went through in my past. And I can now say I am a champion in my life and that I've overcome the traumas of my past. And I hope that that provides encouragement

for other people. And when we talk about my story and things I've been through—you know, I was given up for adoption at birth and there's a time period, a time frame, that you can choose to have the biological parents come back and be involved and my biological mother chose to do so. And when you talk about that and rewriting the aspects of my story, that family that was supposed to adopt me became my God family. I bounced back and forth between the two homes in the first early years of my life, back and forth, back and forth. I've learned recently, in the last few years, that that was because of financial benefit from my biological mother. My biological father was never a part of the picture and, as a result of that, what became to be more and more evident was I didn't have value and worth and I didn't have value and worth in the eyes of the people I thought were supposed to love and care for me and that battle became evident. That battle became internally, for me, very present. I developed anger and rage. The home that I grew up in had drugs coming in and out of the home. We moved from apartment to apartment, and that was just the upbringing that I had. At a very young age, I began to deal with child abuse and neglect and my biological mother, because of some of her mental health issues, being a paranoid schizophrenic and bipolar, there were some real struggles that she had. And I learned as a kid how or what my evening was going to look like by the close of the door, by the footsteps down the hall. I knew whether I needed to put on extra clothes to try to protect myself, to try to run away through my window, or try to go to a friend's house. I knew what it meant to try to protect and keep myself safe. And as a result of those things, back and forth, back and forth, and knowing—and having to break into my biological mother's room for food at times and having to choose to fight for my own safety at times, there was a time where I just felt hopeless. There was hopelessness, there was ultimate despair, and there were challenges whether or not—thinking through my own personal life, what I wanted to do, and whether or not I felt like I deserved to live. And so, I wrestled with that around eight years old, the first of a few attempts of questioning and challenging whether I feel like I belonged here.

WC: So, at eight years old you are already feeling and believing that?

RW: Correct and there was the first of two attempts for myself and truly questioning that and not knowing what to do because the one parent that I thought was given to me did not love me in the way that I saw other people loving their kids. And so, I thought, *Oh, this is my fault. This is because of me and if I can't be loved then I don't want to be here.* And at eight years old it was the first of a few different attempts in my life with rethinking whether or not I thought I needed to be here. And I am here by grace and knowing that that was just a chapter of my life that wasn't through yet and there was more to be written for my story. Soon after that, I was actually placed into the foster care system that became more of my saving grace.

WC: At what age were you when you entered the foster care program?

RW: Nine years old. And I went into foster care and in the state of Kentucky, at the time, there was a level system to where you had one through five. And one would kind of be your kiddos who haven't been impacted by trauma who maybe were more of your infants or more of the easy-to-deal-with kind of kids, all the way up to level five, which were your immense anger, legal issues, constant fighting, the most difficult of kids.

WC: And you were considered to be at what level? What stage?

RW: Level five.

WC: You were—okay.

RW: I was at level five at the age of nine.

WC: You have said that, first of all, it's rare for a teenage boy, especially a teenage African American boy, to find a family that would adopt you.

RW: Mm hm. Correct and when you talk about the need of providing homes from the foster care standpoint, teenagers have the biggest difficulty being adopted because by the time you're a teen, the world has already shaped and molded you and there are some difficulties that come with that. When you look at my life, by the time I was 14 years old, as a teenager, I had already been through 13 different foster homes, a few different mental hospitals, multiple crisis units, and had already been through the ringer and had already been in a place in which I had to learn coping mechanisms to survive. And that's what's unique about my connection to Sunrise Children's Services is because, in the midst of all of that trauma and pain that I was dealing with and no one else would take me in, and Sunrise became my safe haven. And Sunrise actually was the only home that would say, "Hey, we'll care for you when the world has cast you to the side." And that's what's so beautiful about now, on the job that I have working at Sunrise, is that I'm getting the opportunity to instill hope in kiddos who are just like me, who have been cast away to the side, whose parents have left them to the side, and redefining the orphan to where there's maybe parents within the homes but those parents might not be present emotionally, those parents might not be present physically, and there's a brokenness that comes with that. And so, when you talk about the difficulty of being adopted and even being fostered as a teenager, with all of that trauma that you feel and you experience, there's immense amount of difficulty with self-value and an immense amount of difficulty of not dealing with self-sabotage and not dealing with trying to create your own chaos so that you can feel safe. And that's what I get to do every day is to help instill that in kids and providing that clarity but also providing help and to provide hope with what we do at Sunrise Children's Services.

WC: So, Reuben, you say that you create chaos to protect yourself or self-sabotage to protect yourself. What do you mean by that?

RW: So, as a kid, what I began to learn was if I hurt first then I can't be hurt. If I hurt first then there won't be an opportunity for me to have to be vulnerable. It means I can control the chaos. I can control the narratives. If you throw the first punch it's much easier in a fight. And as a kid I learned that very early, that if I hurt first, that means that if I get moved to a different foster home, that it's my decision. It's not because someone doesn't want me. If I choose to act out in school and get into a fight, then I get put in alternative school, it was my decision and no one else was going to have power over my life or power over me anymore. And that's something that I decided to do very young in order to survive because that was the only thing that I knew to do, was to survive.

WC: I read that you also felt that as a kid that you were too bad to love.

RW: Mm hm.

WC: Tell us about that.

RW: Yeah, so, when I looked at other friends of mine growing up, I didn't understand why their parents chose to love them in the way that they did. When I would go and these kids would have video game systems, when they had food on the table, when they had sweet snacks, when they had hugs and kisses, and when they had dads that were there and were present with them and moms that were there and were present with them, with their families and siblings that were there to love and to cheer them on at football games and basketball games, I thought, *Why not me? Why is it that my dad did not choose to love me?* And the only explanation that I had at the time was it must be my fault. It must be because of something that I've done. It must be because of something that I created. When my mom would walk in and would be angry and would lash out at me, I was like, "Well, this is my fault. It's something that I have done to trigger her to make this happen." I didn't understand. It wasn't logical in my brain and I thought, *I am too broken to love.* And then when I got placed in foster care with all those different foster homes, it was like chaos followed me. I dealt with child abuse in foster care. I have multiple scars on my body from the things that I dealt with in those foster homes. I was beat up by foster brothers and sisters. I was beat by foster parents but it seemed like I was the only person that it was happening to and so, for me, it became, *Well, this is my fault. If it's not happening to anyone else, then it's my fault. It's because of something that I've done and I'm not deserving of love. I'm not deserving of care, and not only not deserving, but I'm incapable of being loved and cared for,* because the world around me communicated those lies.

WC: So, at what point did you become introduced to this incredible organization, Sunrise?

RWL So, after I traveled from foster home to foster home and crisis units and mental hospitals there had been a reluctance from any other foster families to take me in. And so, by the time I was about 10 years old, no foster family would take me

because I had a rap sheet, of sorts, that said he will cause chaos, he will break things, he will fight. And when that happened, there was no other place for me to go and to live. And Sunrise, with what we do that's unique and how it even served me, is we take those kids. We have opportunity to serve and to love on those kids. And Sunrise for me, like I said, became my safe haven and provided me an opportunity to be loved unconditionally: that the care and love for me wasn't because they were getting anything from me. It was because they said, "Hey, we're going to choose to love you." And so, Sunrise, during that time frame, which—I was there for two years.

WC: So, Sunrise has a housing facility.

RW: Correct. So, Sunrise, not only do we do foster care but we also go through and we have four residential campuses or children's homes across the state. And what's beautiful about that is that we serve all different types of populations with kiddos involved in that. And we're actually opening a fifth here soon. And so, we serve anywhere from five years old to 18 years old within our residential campuses. And so, we have one campus that is just for sexual violence victims, with sexual violence victims with boys and things of trauma they've experienced. We have a girls' campus, which does a lot of the same things and serving teenagers. And then we've got two other boys' campuses that are really unique. We have an outdoor program that's called our Cumberland Adventure Program. Then we have a Danville Campus in Danville, Kentucky, that's Woodlawn PRTF, which is just an opportunity for even some younger demographics of kiddos to be served and loved and cared on. And I was one of the kids that had an opportunity to go and to be loved and cared on at Sunrise Children's Services.

WC: And then from there did you go back into foster homes or is—

RW: Yes.

WC: —that when you got adopted?

RW: What was unique for me, and a cool thing about my story, is when I bounced from place to place, there was a foster family—there was only one that really wanted me. I didn't know that they existed until I went to Sunrise and I had a few home visits. And so, you go and you get to meet potential foster families and things like that. Well, there was a family that had been chasing me across the state for about three years. I didn't know it at the time but where I bounced from so many different foster homes and so many different places and I had so many different social workers, no one knew where I was at and because I was at Sunrise and had stability for a little bit, they were able to find me. And so, I actually found my forever home through Sunrise Children's Services. I went into foster care with this family, who happened to have my biological sister as well, and a few years later they adopted me.

WC: Wait! Now, how did they know that you existed, for lack of a better way to ask the question.

RW: Yeah. That's a fair question. So, one of the things that I learned was my biological sister, who's five years older than me, actually asked my mom and dad now (so my foster family at the time) to find me because she wanted to spend time with me. So, I actually have two biological siblings. And so, I have a brother that's 10 years older and a sister that's five years older. My biological sister went into the foster care system as well and we had no contact for about two years and then she asked them to find me. And so, my mom and dad are pretty stubborn and so out of their stubbornness they searched the entire state until they found me and continued to chase me across the state as I was moving from home to home, place to place.

WC: So, at what age were you finally adopted and you found your forever family?

RW: So, 14 years old.

WC: I have to ask. What did that feel like, thinking that you were never going to get adopted, that you were too bad to love, all this anger and rage, but going through the program at Sunrise Children's Services and now, out of the blue, this incredible family wants to adopt you?

RW: That was the first time in my life that someone had stepped in—outside of Sunrise—had stepped in, and said, "I'm going to choose to love you through your mess." And even before my mom adopted me, she shared a brief story. It was time for a middle school basketball tournament—this is when I was still in foster care—and I didn't do well at discipline. as you can imagine at that age, like most teenagers, in general, don't do well with it. I had done something at school and as a result of that my mom said, "You're not going to get to play in the tournament game today," and I was like, "Yes, I am." And she said, "No, you're not." And I was like, "Well." I said some other colorful language and then I responded and said, "You know what? Send me back to Sunrise. I don't want to be here. I don't need to be here," and I began to act out and lash out. And what ended up happening was, my mom, in the midst of all the chaos that I was creating, she looked at me and she said, "Reuben, it doesn't matter what you do. You're mine. You're not going anywhere." And that was the first time in my life that I had unconditional love and that was even before she adopted me. She said, "You're mine. You're ours and there's nothing you can do to remove yourself from what we're doing and us choosing to love you." And so, to be adopted, to be cared for, to be loved on during that timeframe and to be loved on in that way, I didn't understand the impact it had on me then, but now as an adult and even having a child, a beautiful princess now, to understand what type of love they were truly showing me and saying, "You're ours and we're wanting to choose to love you through your mess, in spite of your mess because you're our child." And that is a unique gift that I've been given and that provided me hope and I would say helped restart my story and changed a chapter of my life and

began to really bring forth for the first time healing and restoration to areas of my life that have been broken for so long.

WC: Wow. Thanks for sharing your story. In quoting you, you said, “I am now getting to use my story, that was once one of pain, as a story of empowerment and grace.” You say, “My life has equipped me with the tools to share hope with others.” So, talk to us, because it seems like this has been the career path that you have chosen since graduating from college. You have found yourself in positions to serve your community and specifically the underprivileged or underserved communities. What do you attribute your desire to serve to?

RW: Yeah, so, my desire and my care to do that is because of the love that’s been shown to me. I am someone who’s had the blessing of multiple mammas, multiple parents, and multiple people who have kind of positioned themselves in my life to care and to love on me, despite my brokenness. And when you talk about the grace and love that’s been shown to me and the reality of my situation, of my trauma and pain, the only response that I feel is appropriate, the only response that I feel is needed, is to make sure that love that’s been shown to me and the grace that’s been shown to me is reflected to others. And if someone is able to hear my story and to be able to be served and cared and loved for, not to reflect glory onto myself and what I have done, but the story that’s been given to me, the testimony that’s been given to me and the higher power that I believe in, then I think it’s important that others receive that same care, love, and unconditional acceptance. And if I can plant a seed that may blossom into a beautiful flower in the future, it’s worth it. We don’t know what happens. We don’t know what can take place in the future but what I do know is that there is hope for us, and in the midst of those dark spaces and those difficult times, that there is hope. And we can use our battle scars and battle wounds to strengthen our future. And one of the things that I just shared with my wife a few nights ago was that when we make mistakes it feels like failure. But in all reality it’s not failure. I would say that you’re struggling well and when you make those mistakes and when you’re in those hopeless places and those individuals maybe haven’t been given the best deck of cards, is that because you’re still breathing, because you’re still here, you’re struggling well. And that means that you have the opportunity to be resilient. You have the opportunity to bring forth healing for your future. And whatever it is that motivates you, whatever it is that gives you hope that there is more for tomorrow and the sun will rise again, and every day that you wake up is a gift of life that’s been breathed into you, and that’s a beautiful thing to be able to acknowledge and a beautiful thing in knowing that this is not forever. That there is hope for tomorrow and that your story can be used for good.

WC: So, you have this conversation with your wife, and I’m sure that there are many like this with your wife and with other people with that message: the sun will rise again. But how often does your past sneak in? How often does that belief system, that experience that you had as a broken young boy, sneak back into your belief system today?

RW: Every day! Every day it—

WC: How come I knew that would be the answer?

RW: [*Laughs*] Oh, I have a feeling that you have understanding of that. Every day. And I think it's important, and I appreciate you asking that question, for people to know that turning the page on that chapter does not mean that there's not going to be a residual affect. So, when you talk about struggling well, that means that you have to choose to fight for yourself every day. So, I go to therapy—

WC: Whoa, whoa, whoa, Say that again. Oh my gosh, I want to write that down. Struggling well—

RW: Struggling well means you have to choose to fight for yourself every day.

WC: Yeah, because at least I believe this. I believed—okay, I struggled with depression and sadness and self-worth and I just thought, *Gosh, if I read enough books on self-esteem, one day I'm going to coast. One day I won't have to revisit this.* And that's—

RW: Hmm.

WC: —just not the case. That's just not—

RW: Yes.

WC: —how it is.

RW: [*Laughs*] That's not the way the world works.

WC: I want to switch gears for a little bit and talk about the services that Sunrise Children's Services provides, so people have a good understanding. But I also want to ask the question, and obviously I think I know the answer to this. What they provide in the state of Kentucky, every state, every community has these types of organizations and services available, correct?

RW: Correct. Correct. We are a little unique because we've been around for a long time in the state of Kentucky, but it's all over the place. It's everywhere. It really is. Even close to where we're at, there's three or four different services there in California and many, many more that provide opportunities to serve on different demographics of kiddos. Sunrise is just a replication of some of the other things that have taken place and we all take opportunities to learn. Some are more on the national level. Some are more on the—like the Blair Foundation and those types of things that are more on the national level but there definitely are some locally that do what we need to do to serve and to love on those kiddos who maybe have been forgotten.

WC: Wow. Seems like kind of a good time for me to read one of these stories and again I pulled this off the website. So, there's a photo of a beautiful little girl and it says, "Lacoria's mother struggled with a drug addiction and her father was serving a 15-year sentence in prison. She ended up living with grandma; however, she became a ward of the state when her grandma turned ill and was no longer able to care for her. The Rawlings, a Sunrise foster family, were able to bring Lacoria into their home. She was seven years old at the time of her placement and had experienced a lot of trauma for a girl her age." This other beautiful photo of a little boy, "Mikey came to Sunrise and then went directly to the hospital. His parents forced him to hold his bowel movements, which gave him a horrible internal infection. The abuse he experienced within his home was horrific. Sunrise worked directly with the medical treatment team as he slowly healed. Mikey did heal physically and was then discharged back into the care of the Sunrise Psychiatric Treatment Facility in Danville. For the first time, Mikey experience a safe place where he felt that someone loved him." And there's several of these stories that I pulled from the website, that people can go and educate themselves about, because I think hearing these stories absolutely gives us the motivation and the drive and maybe the courage. What do they say? Courage is you have that fear—and this is not an easy thing to talk about, this is not an easy pill to digest—but for us to be aware. Courage means that we still have that fear but we do the right thing anyway. We still get involved and we do the right thing. So, talk about the different services that Sunrise Children's offers. Again, with the intent of educating our listeners about similar services that they can look into, that they can fund, that they can support.

RW: Yeah, so when you talk about Sunrise, what's unique about what we do is we're kind of a Swiss army knife and by that I mean we provide a ton of things all underneath one umbrella. And you can take—anyone that's listening—you can take all these different branches and I guarantee that you can find someone that does something similar within your communities. So, when we talk about foster care, we've got 11 foster care offices across the state of Kentucky, all the way from one end of Kentucky, which is going to be Pikeville, which is close to West Virginia, all the way to Paducah, which is closer to Missouri and those areas. And so, we are unique in the fact that we serve the entire state. We do therapy and counseling for families through our community-based services and choosing to be a resource for the community in that way. And nearly everyone has someone who's done something similar with therapy and counseling within those areas. You know, when we talk about foster care and the need for parents across the state, that is a huge need. I mean, you talk about all the different things that have impacted us over the last few years and the difficulty that we've had within the nation and across the world: the brokenness of homes and the need of families has grown more and more. And when you talk about Sunrise and what we do as an agency, we just try to do all those things under one umbrella and trying to do our best to maximize our resources, maximize our relationships, and maximize the opportunity to choose to love on the community well.

WC: So, someone listening to this, they say, “Okay, I want to go all the way. I want to become a foster family.” What does that look like?

RW: Yeah, so, depending on what state you’re in—everyone kind of has different rules and regulations—but I would say find a local agency. Some states have foster care agencies and then some states have private agencies. So, you can contact and see and I would search in your area to be able to look and see who may be available to be able to go through. There’s a training process that you have to go through—accreditations and things like that that you have to go through. And depending on what type of child you would like to love and care for with opening your home, it takes different types of training. And so, when you talk about maybe a child that maybe has special needs and special to love, there might be things that are needed with preparing your home or making changes within your home that would come. There might be trauma-informed care classes that you have to attend. There are unique opportunities for foster parents across the state to do that and so there’s some training classes that you would have to take. Contact your local agencies, contact your local DCVS, or when you talk about child services within your county, within your state, or within your city, and see how you can get plugged in and involved. And I think it’s really important that people know that being a foster parent is a calling and that it is unique but there are ways that everyone can choose to serve and to love on foster families possibly. So, you can do things like respite care. where maybe you aren’t a full-time foster parent but what you can do is maybe give a foster family a break on a weekend. There may be opportunities for you to choose to love and care for kiddos in that way. You may have a few foster families within your community that you want to choose to partner with. Maybe you bring dinner to them. Maybe you help provide them and love and care in that way. There’s ways that we can all choose and serve to love on one another and it’s important that people know that and say, “Hey, this might not be your calling to be a foster parent but we can all do something to care and to love on those who choose to serve in that way.”

WC: Wow. So, Sunrise Children’s Services has this program called Venture On, which is a—

RW: Mm hm.

WC: —program for kids who are aging out. Talk to us about that, because everybody thinks, *Well, at 18 they’re good to go on their own. They’re at that age where now they’re responsible adults and they’re good to go.* Can you share with us information about that? Educate us.

RW: Absolutely. Yeah, so, for some who don’t know, so, from a foster care standpoint, when you reach the age of 18, there are two different options for kiddos who are wards of the state. And what it means to be a ward of the state is that your parental rights—your parents’ parental rights—have been terminated and that means that you are now in care of the state. When you reach the age of 18, you can either choose to go on by your own or you can choose to have continual care

within the state. And within Kentucky, one of the things that is there for you and strictly through Sunrise, is we have something: our Venture On program or independent living program. And that is an opportunity to provide transitional help for kiddos. I say kiddos a lot, but for kiddos who are needing extra support as they go into adulthood. Most people, if you look in your communities, when you talk about who teaches you how to wash clothes? Who teaches you how to write a checkbook or balance a checkbook? Who teaches you how to, with any financial literacy, who teaches you what goes into the fridge and what doesn't go into the fridge? Most of those things are caught or taught from your parents. There are some kids who don't have those opportunities to learn those lessons and our Venture On program provides opportunity to help teach and instill those types of things within the kiddos who maybe don't have the chance to have parents who are helping them do that. And so, we provide the kiddos with an apartment in partnership with the community. We help them get into school. We help them get jobs. We help provide a support system for them as they transition into adulthood. And so, our Venture On program is really amazing because we kind of get to step in that role of being a parent, or our staff uniquely does, and letting the kids know what's right or wrong. But also, it provides unique opportunity for the community to champion our kids and help them with the transition to adulthood.

WC: I've heard people compare the support that someone who is leaving prison—so post incarceration—the support that they receive compared to a kid who is aging out of a foster care program. Can you comment on that?

RW: Yeah, so, what's unique about that and what I would say is heartbreaking is that if a child chooses to not continue support with the foster care system, there is no financial support for them. It is truly an out-of-the-nest, hopefully you can survive type thing and so we really try to have others inform kids of like, "Hey, no we're here to support you. We're here to make sure that you—" or not make sure but try to help you be successful in the future. And that is something that is a true statement with what you're saying is that there isn't a support system, there isn't financial support, there isn't classes that go along with a transition, because once you reach 18 you're an adult and you can choose what you want to do with your life. And sometimes there are circumstances where a child says, "I want to be by myself," and that may not be what's best for them. Maybe they still need help transitioning into adulthood but there's only so much we can do.

WC: Got it. So, I was told to ask you about this: that you recently took a Sunrise kid to their first day of college [*chuckles*]. Tell us about that.

RW: Oh man, that's a uh—when you talk about what I get to do every day, sometimes you don't get to see the fruit of your labor. You hope and you plant seeds with saying, "Well, maybe, maybe that will make an impact." And there was one kiddo that I got to watch her grow up. And so, she was in one of our facilities and I would go and spend time with them and talk to them and she was always the one that her head seemed to wiggle a little more when she talked. And I know that

you have a little one, a little girl—and teenagers, and I’m preparing myself for this with my little girl, there seems to be extra sass at times—

WC: [Laughs]

RW: [Laughs] —that comes. And she was sassy and but, even through her sassiness, I said, “Hey, I’m going to choose to love you regardless,” and I got to watch her grow up. And then she chose, after some convincing, to go into our Venture On program. And she calls me and we’re talking and she’s like, “Hey, will you take me to register for my classes?” I’m like, “Sure, absolutely,” because she didn’t have any support and I was like, “Yeah, sure, I’ll take ya.” And so, I took her and then she called me the day before school and she’s like, “I need a ride to school, will you help me out?” and I said, “Yeah, absolutely!” And as I had the opportunity to pick her up and to drop her off at the doorsteps of the school, it was one of those moments where I was able to take a step back and say, “This is why we do what we do. This is what providing hope looks like. This is what it looks like to give care and love.” And it was so overwhelming emotionally because—actually, I was getting out of my car and I was like, “Hey, do you have your lunchbox? Do you have your class schedule? Do you have—” you know, all these things? And I felt like I was a parent dropping my kid off at school for the first day. I was able to see her change a chapter of her life at that moment and for her to choose to fight for herself, to go to school, to get her education, and to say, “I will not repeat the years that love has evaded in my life.” And there was something that was so beautiful about that moment that was so restorative, not only for her but for me, as well.

WC: Wow. Congratulations.

RW: Congratulations to me? Congratulations to her! That’s a big victory.

WC: So, switching gears here a little bit—now, I happen to be in the beauty industry and a lot of the people listening to this are also in the beauty industry. Not that we don’t have from every walk of life and so this is a message for any type of a business, because we all have resource available to us and I’m proud to say that our Paul Mitchell Schools in the Kentucky area have partnered with you to create a program called Waymaker Project. What’s that all about?

RW: Yes, I love talking about this [laughs]. When you talk about the Waymaker Project, well, it was started a few years ago with a dream and a hope and partnered together with Mr. Teall of the Paul Mitchell School Lexington and Paul Mitchell School Louisville. We got to sit down and say, “How can we serve our community well?” And Mr. Teall and his heart was like, “We serve very similar demographics of kiddos and very similar and in creating opportunities for the future for those who have dreamed of getting to get into beauty and cosmetology and those types of things.” And as we took a step back, it’s like, “What can we do?” He’s like, “Well, maybe we could do some haircuts and maybe serve the foster care system in that way.” And I was like, “That’s a great idea.” And so, we

sat down and got together and said, “You know, maybe we can do a haircut voucher program,” and he was like, “You know, that’s a unique service opportunity.” And I would say this probably comes from the top down, and knowing your heart, but Mr. Teall was like, “You know, what else can we do?” And I said, “Well, if you’re asking, maybe we can possibly extend this not just to Sunrise kiddos but to foster kiddos across the state.” And he’s like, “Yeah, that’s good.” He’s like, “Can we maybe go a little further?” and I said, “You know what? Sure.” And so, we created a voucher system for the community for families or kiddos in need who need a haircut. And what’s so beautiful about that is that we’ve given almost 400 vouchers, over a span of two years, of people, individuals, who are getting free haircuts by using this voucher system and going to the school. And what’s so beautiful about it is that I’ve been able to, myself, see what happens with creating hope with a haircut and creating hope with an opportunity to turn around and look in the mirror and see a new version of themselves. And it’s so beautiful because you all do such a great job as a team and as a school; that the culture of support, inclusion, is so evident in your students. And when I go and I get to talk about the Waymaker Project to your school and to your teams, it is so wonderful because they really understand the weight and the gift that it is to give hope for people through a haircut.

WC: Wow.

RW: And to be able to instill value and self-worth in someone when they are able to pull back and take a look at who they are after a haircut. There’s something that’s so special about that. So, the Waymaker Project is just that: creating a way to create a new tomorrow for the individuals that come and get free haircuts through the voucher system.

WC: See, I love this story for several reasons. One of my good friends, Jason Schneidman, talks about how a haircut can change someone’s life and he works a lot with the homeless. And people listening to this might think, “Aw, it’s just a haircut. It doesn’t really mean that much.” But when you consider a family who’s in financial crisis, oftentimes the first thing that is eliminated from the family budget would be services, getting groomed, getting haircuts. And when a child is now ungroomed, unkempt, they’re at school, they become a target for bullying and all kinds of things. Their self-worth is diminished and compromised. And so, something as simple as a haircut—and you said it beautifully there—where they get to see a new different version of themselves, is so powerful. But again, you don’t have to be in the beauty industry to offer these types of services and I just challenge listeners: whatever industry you’re in, whatever services and products that you sell, get creative. Find ways. How can what we do every single day to put money into our own pocket, how can we also use those services, those skills, those products to serve other people, including the topic that we’re on right now and that is in the world of adoption, the world of taking care of and providing services to kids who are in need? So, thank you for sharing that story and I think that you were a product of this as well. When you were a kid, the first time that

you were able to go to a barbershop, what did that mean to you? How did that make you feel?

RW: Special. To go and to get—there's something special about a salon and a barbershop, whether it's the talk that's going around—

WC: Well, I would agree with you on that, since that's the industry that I'm in, right?

RW: [*Laughs*] Well, I can say it! I can say there's something special about walking into that space and to hear the conversations, to hear what happens. And as I have heard, it's tough to get up when you have half a haircut and so to be able to, for someone who's giving the haircuts, I had the opportunity to see that I wasn't just a statistic, that I wasn't just institutionalized, that I was a human. And there was something that was so special about that, that wish to receive from me when I went to the barbershop. I remember going and getting the haircut and seeing the joy of life around me, seeing the joy of people around me, seeing the opportunities to laugh and to be silly. And that's not something I'd ever seen before. And so, getting that first haircut, for me going to the barbershop and walking out and I'm someone that—fresh-cut confidence is a real thing. When you get that haircut, the light hits you a little different and there's something that's comical about that but also that's so true about how you can then look at yourself. I didn't have understanding of all those things as a kid but getting to see someone use their talents to make an impact on my life was really special.

WC: You know, for years we worked with an incredible woman by the name of Sister Bonnie, a Catholic nun who had a program called Haircuts from the Heart. And the whole idea was that she would raise money to then purchase gift certificates from salons. And the reason why she did it that way was so that when she gave out these gift certificates for these families in crisis, or children in the foster care program to come into a salon, they weren't there in that salon as though they were receiving charity, if that makes sense.

RW: Mm hm.

WC: They were there like any other guest. In fact, sometimes the salon that was servicing these wonderful guests had no idea that the background of the people that they were servicing in that moment—oh, and Sister Bonnie, she was so smart. Whenever she bought the gift certificates from salons and from beauty schools that she then passed out to these individuals, part of the gift certificate included the tip [*chuckles*].

RW: [*Chuckles*]

WC: So, the stylist was, again, they didn't know who this person was but they got a tip on top of it and of course it just created an even more wonderful experience. So, thanks for sharing that.

RW: Absolutely. One day I hope we get there. But it's something that is so special. So, I can tell you with even the program and what we started with the Waymaker Project, when I go and get to share about the project, Mr. Teall invites me every few months with the new classes that come through, to come and to share about the Waymaker Project and what it means for the community. The faces of your students and the way they light up in the rooms when they say "Oh, I get to serve someone today." And that's the way that I always try to present it. When they are serving and caring on the kiddos or the families, it's like, "No, you're getting to serve someone today with your skill, with your talent," and they light up. And not only that, but what has also been special is that I think there's probably seven to eight people that I have went—shared about the Waymaker Project, shared some of my personal story and what the impact is for me—that have come to me afterwards and say, "Thank you for the opportunity to serve people who grew up like me." And that is something that is so special with the Waymaker Project. It not only serves the community well, but your students—it's been amazing to watch them get restoration by helping serve the community well.

WC: That's the law of the universe. What goes around comes around.

RW: Comes around.

WC: Karma, cause and effect; call it whatever you want.

RW: Yes.

WC: So, start to wrap things up here. So, you're a father of a beautiful, young daughter. Congratulations.

RW: Yeah.

WC: How has your life experience shaped you as a father?

RW: Uh, so, I would say that has come in different stages [*laughs*]. There is the immediate anxiety and fear that comes with, "Oh, I'm going to be a parent," when you first discover that the little one's on the way. And then comes the guilt and comes the shame that says, "I'm not good enough." And when you talk about, we talked about earlier, choosing to fight every day for yourself, that battle comes rushing in. Those floodgates open and the lies that you have told yourself or the others that told you within your life comes to the forefront of your mind. And then when I got to watch my baby come into the world, it was the ultimate clarity of, "I can do this." And it wasn't just like, "Oh, my expectations are to be better than what I had," because that's a very low bar. My dad, my biological father not being there, all I had to do was be physically present and that was enough. But when I saw her and she grabbed my hand, and as the years have gone on, what I've been able to see and how that has changed me as a parent is that I'm going to choose to fight for my daughter every day and that means that I'm going to choose to love her unconditionally. And that does not mean perfection, because perfection is not the goal in my mind and within our home. The goal's not

perfection. The goal is in imperfection to show grace. And that means providing a safe place for my daughter to have grace, providing a safe place for my wife to have grace, providing a safe place in our home for me to have grace, and knowing that maybe that was never something that I experienced as a kid. And it's had a huge impact on me because I can put my head on my pillow and be at peace in knowing that I chose to fight for my family today. And that isn't always easy and I have failed, but once again it's not failure. I have struggled well and those lies of "I am unlovable and I can't love," they came up and every once in a while pop their little heads up and I have to then fight back and say, "No, I can love well. I can show grace. I can show mercy despite the fact there's times where I don't know what it looks like but I can choose to do that." And so having a little girl brought forth all the feelings, all the fear, all the anxiety. But what it also has done is given me the opportunity to choose to fight for myself and another reason to fight for my family.

WC: Wow. That's beautiful. What a perfect way to wrap this up. Reuben this has been, [*chuckles*] I know, emotional for both of us for us to hear this story and to talk about not only your personal story but the stories of those that you serve. And it's emotional to think of the opportunity that we have. Lots of these are happy tears to know that, wow, I have an opportunity here to use my resources to serve other people. Those are super happy tears. And when we have that realization, and sometimes I need that slap in the face on a regular basis. "Come on, Winn, you can do so much more". One of my favorite celebrities and mentors is Gary Sinise and he says, you know, "We do a lot but we can all do better. We can all do more," and I love that.

RW: I am very thankful for this opportunity and when I get the chance to share my testimony and to share my story and my journey, sometimes people say, "Hey, you know, I don't want to put you in a situation to where you have to relive your trauma," and I appreciate that approach but also for me it is a gift that I can take a look back on my life and say, "Here I am." And I can say, "Job well done." And that is something that I can rejoice in and looking at my trauma not as one, like I said, of pain and my story just of pain and trauma but my story to be one of resilience, empowerment, and being able to overcome. And now, as I'm going into about 10 years of marriage and having a beautiful three-year-old and doing things within my own job, I'm now getting to see restoration. And so thank you, Winn, and thank you for you and your team to allow me a chance to walk through what restoration has looked like for me and for giving me the chance and the opportunity to help, to hopefully bring hope for others that they can one day be restored, regardless of their trauma, regardless of their story of adoption, or regardless of their story of pain, that restoration can also come to them and that all they have to do is to choose to fight for themselves every day. And that that struggle is not failure but it's an opportunity to build resilience and an opportunity to choose to fight even harder for themselves.

WC: Wow. Thanks, Reuben. This has been incredible. Thank you so much.