

TEXAS AFTER VIOLENCE PROJECT

Interview with Lewis Conway, Jr.

Date: June 20, 2018

Place: Home of Lewis Conway, Jr.
Austin, Travis County, Texas

Equipment: Sony FDR-AX1, Sony FS7

Media: SanDisk ExtremePro SD Card

Interviewer: Darwin Hamilton

Videographer: Annette Price, Matthew Gossage

Transcriber: Jennifer Pumphrey

Auditor: Erin Bajema

[Clip 1]

LEWIS CONWAY JR.: Where am I looking? At Darwin? At the camera? At Darwin? OK.

ANNETTE PRICE: At Darwin.

MATTHEW GOSSAGE: At Darwin.

DARWIN HAMILTON: State your name and spell it for me.

CONWAY: Lewis Conway Jr. L-E-W-I-S C-O-N-W-A-Y J-R.

HAMILTON: So where are you from Lewis, originally?

CONWAY: I was born in Abilene. Abilene, Texas.

HAMILTON: And where did you grow up?

CONWAY: Austin, my dad was an army vet when he retired. He retired to Dyess Air Force base in Abilene, and we lived there for three years, no five years. We moved to Austin in the summer of 1975.

HAMILTON: So what was that experience like growing up here in Austin, Texas for you?

CONWAY: Well, you know, it's phases, right? I think initially when we first moved here, we moved here off of Cherrywood. And I remember it being- I guess now we could call them hippies, right? But we were the only- there were like two black families on the street. But it was a well-mixed neighborhood, and growing up in East Austin back then was a little different than it is now. But I've always kind of felt like my youth in Austin was an experience that I could've had any place else.

HAMILTON: Were there any challenges growing up as a child here in the East side of Austin?

CONWAY: I think the challenges for me began before I hit Austin. So I was born without the ability to speak. It wasn't until I was about four years old before I actually began to speak, and even after I began to speak, I had a debilitating stutter. So being fat and stuttering was something that when I got to Austin, I was already kind of isolated because of my inability to speak. So when I entered a school at Maplewood, they immediately put me in speech therapy, and back then speech therapy meant that you were in special ed. But my mom refused to allow them label me special ed. So the challenges for me began with having a lot of words in my head but not being able to get them out. So that's how I became a writer, is that I couldn't talk. And I was a voracious reader, but not being able to read aloud and being called out in class to read aloud, and

just wishing I was invisible, alright. So when you translate that into a black kid that grew up in almost an all-white neighborhood, because when we moved from Maplewood, we moved to Coronado Hills, and Coronado Hills at that time was all white. So all of my friends were white. So I grew up black in a white world. But my dad ran an apartment complex on the East side called Grand Villa, and at that time Grand Villa was where they used to call it drug central USA. So we would literally- at that time, Coronado Hills was the suburbs, and we would leave the suburbs and go to the East side where I was introduced to a whole different life style. So yeah, there was difficulties being black in Austin as a kid, but it was more- you don't know that you're going through those difficulties at the time. It's not until you're older that it's like, Oh wow, that was whack. Know what I mean?

HAMILTON: Did you have any nicknames?

CONWAY: Of course not (laughing). Absolutely, I was born with a nickname. I came home from the hospital Doonie, D-O-O-N-I-E. And Doonie is really a name that carries to this day with some people, but Doonie was a name that it was so embedded that when I went to my twenty year high school reunion, my year book name didn't- the name in the year book was Doonie Conway. And it just blew me away that they actually thought Doonie was my name, everyone called me Doonie and some of my family still calls me Doonie. So, but Doonie was someone, for me anyway, Doonie died when I went to prison, right. And then when I came home- or in prison, I took on a name of Russell, and then when I came home from prison it was Louis Fatz.

HAMILTON: Take me back to the origin of Doonie, what was the origin of Doonie?

CONWAY: Doonie was- the folk lore is my Aunt, Aunt Mae, rest in peace, it was some derivative of junior and I don't know like, that has been the mystery of my whole life, is like where did Doonie come from? I used to tell people it came from Doonie and Burke, just because it sounded cooler, but I don't know where my Aunt Mae came up with Doonie but Doonbug, as a kid I was Doonie. Matter of fact, a lot of people in Austin, if you say the name Doonie Conway, it will register quicker than Lewis Conway Jr. will.

HAMILTON: So you mentioned that growing up there was a debilitating stutter, since I've known you, you have become quite the public speaker and orator, tell me how you developed that.

CONWAY: Without being esoteric, without being too spiritual about it, it must've been- so, when I was in high school I listened to a lot of AM radio, I used to listen to a lot of Rush Limbaugh, imagine that, when he first came out. And one of the commercials that came on was one- it used to say that people judged you by the words you used, and it just stuck with me. And after his program, somehow or another, there was an interview with James Earl Jones, and James Earl Jones talked about having a debilitating stutter. And it blew me away, because I was a nerd, so I loved Star Wars, and I realized he was the voice of Darth Vader and I was like, Wow, he stuttered? I was like, Nah, no way, no way. The guy asked him how he stopped stuttering, and he said his drama teacher told him to recite Shakespeare in the mirror. So, I ran, and got my sister's copy of Othello and I began to recite Shakespeare in the mirror, and by the time by—so I dropped out of high school when I was a junior, and went to college. So, by the time my freshman year in college, I was like literally reading aloud like I had never stopped, or didn't know how. It became my favorite thing, to speak and to—but what's funny though, is that prior to that, I was a rapper, right? And I could do poetry, Mel Tillis was a huge, huge influence on me. Huge influence—a lot of people don't even know who Mel Tillis is or was. When he died I told my wife, I was like, "Wow, that was my hero." Because Mel Tillis had a debilitating stutter, but when he sang, he never stuttered, so, yeah it was Shakespeare, Shakespeare and James Earl Jones. That's kind of the story that I tell, is that the one thing that most people would stop them, has become my platform. All right, so the fact that I was born without the ability to speak, and now I get paid to speak. So, that's why I said I don't want to be too esoteric about it but, that's the power of God, that's the power of—only that infinite wisdom, that infinite intelligence could plan that out. That somebody who was born without the ability to speak, now gets paid to speak. I couldn't have planned that.

HAMILTON: So you mentioned that Doonie had died and you reinvented yourself. How many times have you reinvented who Lewis Conway is? Tell me about that.

CONWAY: The reinvention, I've called myself the comeback kid. It's funny you say that, because you are one of the few people that's picked up on that. I've had to reinvent myself countless times. Prison, I think, is where you learn that. But prior to going to prison, again I was a person that couldn't speak, so then I learned how to speak, so I became a stuttering person to this confident person. I jumped into the music scene when the music scene first started here. You know, then I decided to be this college person, a journalist, then started hanging out with some thugs, go to prison. In between that I'm a Mormon, go to prison become a Muslim. But in between the

Mormon, the Muslim, I get ordained, right, as an African Baptist Episcopal Minister. Then I come out of prison, and, you know, it's Fatz, right? I had to become this entity because Doonie was dead, they flew into the buildings, in 2001, so I lost my religion. So who was I? So I became Fatz and then Fatz evolved into DJ Big, then I moved to Fort Worth and Big was like the last iteration before I became Lewis Conway Jr.

HAMILTON: You mentioned going to prison, what was your first experience with law enforcement before going to prison?

CONWAY: My first experience with Law enforcement was when I was about seven years old, I was in my front yard, I was playing with a water gun. And for whatever reason this cop was driving up our street, and I decided to point the gun at the cop, and I remember the cop shining—because back then they used to have the light on the car—I remember him shining the light on the car on the yard, and my mom came outside buggin', like, "What are you doing?" And the cop was like, "He has a gun." She was like, "It's a water gun." But I'm seven years old, I really don't understand what's going on, I just know I'm aiming this gun at the cop. It's funny you ask that because I just thought about this the other night. Had that happened now, I'd have been dead at seven years old, but it was a different time. So, my next encounter with law enforcement, (laughing) the day I got my driver's license, I'm taking my sister to school—I mean to work, and I get pulled over on Tillery and Airport, right by the cemetery. I get pulled over the day I got my license. My next encounter was at HT, I got accused of assaulting someone and cops showed up at my momma's house with a warrant for my arrest for an assault that happened on 6th street, in the middle of the afternoon, that no one saw. So, yeah, that was it. So, my first official encounter with law enforcement was when I was eighteen.

HAMILTON: You mentioned an assault, was that your first experience with violence?

CONWAY: Absolutely, there was—so, I was a weird kid, right? I grew up with a very—my dad did two tours in 'Nam, he did a tour in Korea, he was from Calvary, Texas and grew up rough. So, my—the majority of my uncles have died from violence, my grandfather died from violence. So, I'm not going to say my father was a violent man, but he was violent. So, when I was young, dude, I'm talking like when I was young, like five or six, seven years old, I hit my sister when I was about six, I must have been five because I was over on Cherrywood. My sister took my little Hot Wheel and ran away and I hid behind the corner and when she came around the

hallway, I socked her and gave her a black eye. My daddy beat my ass, and that was the last time I put my hands on a woman, all right? But what that did, that made my mother worried, so she told me from the time I was a kid, "You don't have the option to fight, you're too big, and if you beat somebody up, you lose. If you don't beat somebody up, you lose." So, I grew up, I'm not gonna say passive, but I definitely grew up not feeling like violence was an option. So, I didn't have a bunch of fist fights as a kid, I wasn't a bully, I wasn't—I didn't pick on people, I just wasn't that dude. As a matter fact I stopped playing football and chose to be in a rock band, not because I didn't like violence, the chicks were prettier when you played guitar. (Laughing) So yeah man, but that was—I think that's why the incident was so weird for me, right, because I am not that dude, even now you see me, like, I am not even that dude. I guess even back then I was a lover not a fighter, right, so being accused of something violent—and until I actually went to prison for something violent, it was a series of me being accused of being violent.

HAMILTON: So what led to going to prison?

CONWAY: That's a loaded question, that's an open ended—I mean, because there's like—so, there's the actual incident, and then there's the things that led up to the incident. And so if you take away one, the other one doesn't happen, right? So, I guess it's almost a two-part question. So, the first part of that question is, had I not felt the need for male bonding, had I not felt the need for brotherhood, had I not felt the need of just that male guidance, I would have never gotten into drugs the way I did. But because I grew up with a father that was not affectionate, and I grew up with two sisters, when I got to college and I was surrounded by dudes showing love in a way that, I guess it's the same thing that brings dudes into gangs, right, because they brought me into the gang. That's how I became a Gangster Disciple, it's that I was around them dudes, so that's what introduced me into crack and street selling. Prior to that I was just a connection, because they were white boys, you know what I mean, so I was a connection. When I got introduced to the crack game, when they brought crack down here, it was different, you know? That's what put me in that mindset of I need my own little crew, I need my own little spot. And I tried—because I was introduced to New York and DC, my gang wasn't based from Texas, so I was trying to do something that I had seen other dudes do in other cities that didn't rock here. And that put me in conflict, because I was going against the grain, and my homies was the actual plugs so I didn't have to, I didn't have to negotiate. I could have been the plug, because I was that close to the source, but I was trying in the streets, so yeah.

HAMILTON: For people who are not familiar with the slang, what is the plug?

CONWAY: [LAUGHTER] Ah, the plug would be the source, that would be the one who wholesales, the wholesaler. That would be the Walmart distribution center.

HAMILTON: So, what's the second part of that open ended question, what landed you in prison?

CONWAY: Choosing to be a drug dealer, that put me in a game that I didn't know the rules to, and I got robbed. I got robbed one night of some drugs and money that was not mine, just not knowing what to do, I went to go find the dude, and I couldn't find him. Searched for him for about three or four hours and couldn't find him, and ended up running into the dude that actually fronted me the drugs. Front means like, consignment, I had drugs on consignment, and the reason I had drugs on consignment was because I was broke. So not only did he take the profit I was going to make, but he took the money I owed, plus the dope I owed. So, I was put in a position that, that's part of the game. So, I went to go find the guy, I couldn't find him, I knew he would end up showing up at a place where they smoke at. The guy whose apartment it was owed me money, so he told me when the dude showed up. I went down there, I walked in the door, cat was smoking. I said, "Man, I need my shit back." And, you know, I think for twelve hours I had been playing that conversation over in my head, like, you know kind of like that guy who practices how he is going to pull his gun out, I had that conversation in my head for twelve hours while I am looking for him. And he told me, "Fuck you, n****, what you gonna do?" And I think in that twelve hours that was just the one thing I had never prepared myself for, was, "Fuck you, n****, what you gonna do?" And it just took me aback, I was like, "Dude, you robbed me!" That's how lame I was, right, I'm plea bargaining. I'm like, "Dog, you robbed me. Dude that's not my shit, yo." And dude was like, "N**** I said fuck you, what you gonna do?" And walking out of my apartment, I had grabbed a pocket knife, and for whatever reason I took out the pocket knife and I had it behind my back and I'm standing fairly close to him. And I don't know if he—to this day, I don't know if he leaned over, I don't know if he moved, but whatever he did spooked me, and I stabbed him. I stabbed him one time in the chest and, yeah, looked at me like, man I thought you stabbed me. And I said, "Shit, I thought I stabbed you." And he started bleeding, like a spigot almost. Yeah man, it was legs went to jelly, left the house, threw the knife, called the cops. Better for them to show up, I had never been so glad to see brick in my life. You might not be old enough to know who brick was.

HAMILTON: Yeah.

CONWAY: (Laughing) You might not be old enough to know who brick was. But, if you was in the streets you knew who brick was, so if you was glad to see brick show up, you know I was doing bad.

HAMILTON: So when you were arrested and you realized what you had done, what were some of the things that were going through your mind?

CONWAY: I think I was still convinced that I had stabbed him in self-defense, because, like, he was known to be a shooter, he was known to be a jacker, but I just didn't know him as that, you know what I mean? And I literally, you know in that moment, I don't know what spooked me, but something spooked me. Because there was no—and I can say this now, there was no animosity, there was no anger, it was fear. Because, again, I wasn't that dude, I wasn't—and now that I look at it, if I was that dude, I would have boxed him, all right? Because he didn't—I could have boxed him, but I wasn't that dude, you know what I mean? And so, when I analyzed it in between the cop car and going downtown to the homicide station, I realized that all of those fist fights that I hadn't had, and all those times that I hadn't gotten into a fight, that's what it had culminated into, that one moment. And so, you know, it's a swirl of emotion, it's a swirl of—you know, you're still—because at that time he wasn't dead. He didn't die immediately. He died like probably four hours afterwards in surgery. So, for four hours I hadn't been charged with murder, I had been charged with aggravated assault. But once I had gotten charged with murder, that's when life changed. That's when—you know how they fool you, they tell you the more you tell them, the faster you go home? So, I'm telling them everything, because I'm like, "What's there to hide, hell, I called you, right?" But when the cop left the room and he came back in smiling, like, I just knew I was going home. I was like, Finally, Jesus, you know, I get to go home. He said, "Congratulations, Mr. Conway. You've just been charged with first degree murder." And literally, I felt my soul leave. They took a picture like five seconds later, and they lead me down this hallway that's filled with photographers or reporters. And I'm twenty-one years old, it's a Sunday night, and I'm led down this hallway, you know— "Why'd you do it? What happened? Tell us what happened." Yeah, so I think, as I look back at it, the resounding thought is, "How am I going to tell my momma?"

HAMILTON: So while incarcerated, what were you thinking about as far as the outcome of what you realized that had happened, or what did you expect?

CONWAY: Well there was two phases to my incarceration. There was the incarceration before I made bond, and then the post-bond incarceration. So, for me, the transformation came during that eight weeks before I made bond. During that eight weeks, you know the first two weeks, I couldn't sleep. There was a twenty-three hour reel of me stabbing him over and over. It was just a reel that played in my head, I couldn't sleep. Finally, I remember it like, I'll never forget it. One night in the cell, I just broke down. I just asked God, "Please, make it go away, whatever I got to do, I'll do it. Just make that go away". It went away, I think at that moment is when I turned it over to God. And I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just knew I didn't want to be doing it anymore. I didn't want that life anymore. I didn't want to be that dude, I just— life had changed. Everything that was important to me became very, very small to me, and I wanted to do something that I never wanted to do in my life before and that was make my parents proud. That had never been important to me. For some reason, at that moment it became

important to me. So that eight weeks in jail is what led to a year and a half on bond, and that's where I really cut ties from the streets. Started wearing suits and ties, went to work for the Texas Water Commission, it just really changed my life around. So, by the time I went in to prison, my mindset had already changed. One of the significant moments though, was catching the eight Govalle in front of Short Stop on Berkley. I came across one of the ladies I used to sell crack to, and she was pregnant. Because back then we used to get food stamps, and we used to charge three for one, and she used to come with the food stamps, so we would love to see her. And she had her baby, and the baby's—one side of his was slack. I remember seeing her getting on that bus, I remember seeing that baby, and said, "Never again. Never again." So, going into prison, I had already been ordained, I was my dad's assistant pastor. I had changed [DOORBELL RINGS]. But I when I got—[LAUGHTER – BACKGROUND NOISE] The door.

[END OF CLIP 1]

[CLIP 2]

HAMILTON: So we were talking about your experience while you were out on bond, what was that like?

CONWAY: So, I was twenty-one years old, with a ninety-nine year sentence hanging over my head, and I had an attorney telling me that I was going to be acquitted for self-defense. But whenever I would talk to him on the phone, he would say, "You know, you're facing five to ninety-nine." But he would say the five real low, and the ninety-nine real loud, and so that really colored how I moved. It's a lot of weight, carrying ninety-nine years over your head at twenty-one, on top of never going through counseling, addressing the trauma of killing someone, still half-ass dealing with a drug addiction, a cocaine addiction. And so, it was a time of, how do you prepare for prison? Particularly if you don't think you're going to prison. It wasn't two months until I actually got convicted that the idea of me going to prison got on the table. Prior to that, it was all self-defense, I could be acquitted. So, the time on bond was a time of maturation, it was a time where I became—I dropped Doonie and that was weird too, right, because I didn't know who—you know what I mean? I definitely never embraced Lewis Conway because of my father, right, so in between that time, between going to prison and becoming—well before I was Razul, I was Malik Lamumba. Yeah, so that was a weird time. That was like, that was the pit before the

palace type thing, right, or I was a stranger in a strange land. All the cats I knew from Creigwood, all the cats I knew from Chicago, I cut ties with. I didn't do any more music. I was in this corporate world, I was twenty-one dating a thirty-six year old, who had kids my age, you know what I mean? Yeah, it was a weird space that I haven't really thought about since, it was a weird experience. Yeah.

HAMILTON: Did you plead guilty, or did you go to trial?

CONWAY: I plead guilty, my attorney—we had already spent like \$10,000, and he said another \$9,000, we can go to trial. But what triggered that was for a year and a half, they had supposedly lost this tape. So, I gave two confessions, one was right at the scene, and they took another confession downtown and so, I never heard the transcript of them both, but in that moment, I was told that they conflicted. So, based upon that conflict the state was prepared to go to trial. Now for a year and a half, you know how you go to court, they reset, reset, reset. This one particular day we were waiting there forever and he brings in a Walkman—that's how old it was—he brought in a Walkman and some headphones, and he said, I want you to hear this. He pressed play, and it was like being in a time capsule, or a time machine or something. I could hear the birds, when he hit play, I shot right back to that moment when I was in the back of that cop car, after just stabbing somebody. I heard myself talking and then he had me listen to the tape I gave downtown, and it was different, of course, because it was a different space and time. But my sister made the decision that we couldn't go to trial. And so, they offered me ten years for first degree murder or twenty years for voluntary manslaughter, and in '92 I was under the quarter law, he told me I would do two years and come home. So, we decide to take the twenty, non-aggravated, which now I know should've took the murder for ten years. Yeah, it was a lot that I could've done, so I took the maximum. But yeah, he convinced us that I would not be able to go to trial and win, then he created this story too of a—what are they called?—public defender that the victim had, that he had told the public defender that he was afraid of me, and she was prepared to testify. And so, he put that in the mix too. So yeah, we plead out.

HAMILTON: Talk about weighing that ten years versus the twenty years. What was the different reasons to go with the larger sentence versus—k?

CONWAY: Listening to n*****, (laughing) no, I'm just being honest. Some dude said, "Don't take anything aggravated." Right, so it was going to be ten aggravated. I'm twenty-one, I could not see thirty-one, coming home at thirty-one, I just couldn't see it. And when

he told me that I would do two years, we had talked about deferred adjudication. And I remembered the first thing that he asked me, he asked me, even before I had gone to court, he said, "How much time do you think you can do?" I said, "Shit, two years of deferred adjudication." So, I think he understood that two years would stick with me, so he told me I would do two years and come home. So back then, for every year—every month you did, you got a year, so in twenty months you would come home. That was partially true, in twenty months, I did come up for parole. It wasn't until much later I realized that I did make parole, but there were people protesting my parole, that I didn't know until I got home, and got out. Matter of fact, I made parole every time, three times I made parole and I got set-offs because of protests.

HAMILTON: So when you were arrested after taking the deal, did you go back to the county jail or did you go straight to TDCJ?

CONWAY: Yeah, so that was interesting, so I got convicted March 29th, 1992, and it was on a Wednesday. My birthday April first, the judge allowed me to stay out until April 2nd, 1992, which was a Monday. [INAUDIBLE] And I went to jail in a suit, I don't know why, but I went dressed up, and they put you in a holding cell for like five, six hours and then they shipped me off to the county. I stayed in county for nine months, I stayed in Del Valle for nine months before I caught the chain, building two for nine months. I was on building one about at eight weeks, so you know you get seduced, that that's where you're going to end up at, but no. I got convicted, they put me on building two and it was a different ball game, [LAUGHTER] different ball game, yeah man.

HAMILTON: So describe what is the chain, what does that mean?

CONWAY: Catching the chain, so when you've never been locked up before you hear a lot of cats in the day room, talking about catching the chain. And before you know what that is, you literally think it's a chain, and I'm like, I don't want the chain, whatever chain they're talking about catching, I don't want it. People kept talking about catching the chain, and when someone caught the chain, and they didn't never come back, you sure didn't want to catch the chain. I don't want to catch that chain. So, the chain is a bus, and I don't know why they called it the chain, but they called it the chain bus. I guess it's because cats was on the bus in chains probably, but it's the chain bus, and the bus is the bus that takes you to prison. And so, you hear cats who have been to prison, talking about wanting to hurry up and catch the chain, and cats who have not

been to prison was talking about they don't want to catch the chain, or what is the chain?
[LAUGHTER] Well yeah, catching the chain, or the blue bird, catching the blue bird.

HAMILTON: So you were about twenty-one?

CONWAY: Twenty-two, I'm twenty-two.

HAMILTON: So you realize, this is it, I'm finally in prison. What was that experience like?

CONWAY: County or prison?

HAMILTON: Actually in prison.

CONWAY: So, I'll let you know when it got real. So, I come from Travis County, they didn't do a lot of strip searching in Travis County, you actually have plastic curtains over your showers, guards was half-ass polite to you. Well, when I knew it was real it was when they brought me—when you leave the county going to TDC they bring you these jumpsuits, and the jumpsuit that they brought me only came up to my waist. So I had to ride from Travis County handcuffed to another cat with a jumpsuit that went up to my waist all the way to East Texas, and when we got to East Texas there was a white woman that had on one of them Smokey the Bear hats, and the first thing she told us was to strip. And that's when I knew it was real, because I didn't know what she meant. I was like, "I don't know what you mean about stripping." "Get out of 'em!" "I definitely don't know what you mean by 'get out of 'em'." And it's twenty degrees, East Texas, cats is getting undressed and I'm looking at them like what is y'all doing, y'all bugging, it's twenty degrees out here. I'm not getting out of nothing. And that's when, "Inmate, if you don't get out of them clothes we're gonna lock you up." That's when it got real. I think in the county you half-ass feel like you're at home, because your parents can come see you, your girl can come see you, you know the guards, they're from the hood. You get out there to East Texas with these redneck white folks and when they say boy, they mean boy for real, and I had never experienced that before. I think that's when it got real with me, I was like yeah, I'm in the penitentiary now.

HAMILTON: You mentioned that you had come up several times, you had made parole and that your parole was protested. What did that feel like, each time you had come up and your parole was protested?

CONWAY: So, not knowing it was protested, I think if I had known it was protested, it'd probably made my time hard, because I would have been dying to know who was protesting it. So, on the inside I didn't know I was being protested, I just know I was being set off.

So, each time I got set off, I got set off for a longer time. And, you know, you play that game with yourself, what am I doing wrong? I know I'm not the person I was. I know I've taken these classes, I know I've sat in this AA group, I know I am not having the same conversations, I know I'm not dealing with the same people, I know I've read this book. What more do you want me to do? Then you come back to the parole board again and I was actually having parole interviews, not just with the unit parole officer. I was actually being interviewed by the parole board member, and they would leave the room, they were like, "Well, you got my vote." And then to leave that room and be floating on a cloud of expectation and then you get that, whatever it is, the I-60, the lay in, that tells you, you got that set off, it's demoralizing. That's when the rubber hits the road, am I going to—am I changing because I might get out, or am I changing because that's what I need to do? And that's when the rubber begins to hit the road, when you stop having options at parole, right, and you get to the point of saying, "You know what? Maybe I was changing just so I could make parole." And that's when it gets real, that's when you start doing that work. Right, that's when you start really, if you're blessed, you're surrounded with some people who are doing that same thing, who have made that decision not to come back and that's when you really begin doing that work to make sure you don't come back. At least for me, I began to talk to people who had been to prison and really cataloging what they did to get back in prison, so by the time I left prison, I had a catalog of what not to do to go back to prison, so yeah.

HAMILTON: First question, how many years did you spend incarcerated?

CONWAY: Seven—a total of eight years.

HAMILTON: In that eight years what kind of physical, mental, psychological, emotional tolls did that have on you?

CONWAY: So initially, in the county, you're allowed to lift free weights, so I did a lot of bodybuilding the first two or three years in prison, was all about physical. And I got a job in the kitchen, and it went all downhill from there. So physically that's when the high blood pressure kicked in, that's when, you know, really not dealing with the mental trauma of taking a life, not dealing with the trauma of coming from a family that was not affectionate. There was a lot that came out in my family history before I went to prison, because we decided to do family counseling and there was a lot of stuff that came out that I had no clue, that we—when I was like, Wow, this is my family? So, the trauma mentally comes from the isolation, comes from having to look at twenty years, right, down the barrel and say, "How do I do it?" And not seeing any light at

the end of the tunnel. But then you get surrounded by people, you complain about how much time you're doing, and then somebody shows you their time slip, and it says a 100 years, and they done did twenty-five. And you're like, ok, I'm good, at least I got a date, you feel me. So, yeah man, it's literally that thing can make you or break you. You either come home a better criminal, or you come home determined not to go back.

HAMILTON: So when you got that date, and you knew you were going home, what did you do?

CONWAY: Tight roped on dental floss, I literally walked on eggshells—you know, when you're in prison, you get that FI1, you feel like they can snatch it any day. You feel like anybody around you, because prison can be a kind of a crab in a bucket environment, you want to see the cat go home, but damn, if you're gone, I'm here. I always had the attitude that everybody who leave, man, that's one closer to me, you know, and it was a feeling of anticipation, fear. I was always a nerd, so even in prison I was always into computers, I was writing code in prison. So, matter of fact I learned how to build a website, by listening to a cat tell me what a website was and so I didn't have that kind of fear, the fear I had was—actually, you know what? To be honest, I wasn't scared, and I think that that's what the problem was, was that they had convinced me that people would accept me, that the world would be accepting of you. You're gonna find a job, people are gonna embrace you, you've done your time, you served your sentence. So yeah, I was convinced I was coming home to a world that understood my issues, understood that I had accepted my crime, and I had caution and remorse and contrition, and I was going to be good. It ain't what happened, but that's how I left prison, believing that.

HAMILTON: So let's talk about your beliefs in that first day, what was that like?

CONWAY: That first day, you know, when you're from Austin, in Huntsville you got two buses, they go to Houston or Dallas, and if you're from Austin you have to take the bus to Houston. And there was these chicks that hopped on the bus in Huntsville and they hustle dudes all the way to Houston, and I remember sitting next to a white boy from Austin and when we got to the Houston bus station, I remember being so, just, I can touch people again. Like, I don't have to ask for permission, I can actually, wow. I remember standing in that bus station for a minute and just looking around like, wow, I can actually move. And I went to KFC, to order- in my head, I wanted a two piece and a biscuit, that's all I wanted. I wanted a two piece and a biscuit, man, that's all I wanted. I'd been thinking about that since Huntsville, I want two piece and a

biscuit. And when I got up there to KFC and I looked at the menu, that's how long I was locked up, everything was boneless, they had boneless wings, boneless- so I asked the cat behind the counter, I said, "Hey man, did they stop putting bones in chicken, like they don't make chicken with bones no more?" [LAUGHTER] and the dude, because you been locked up, man, you don't know, so I'm like, you know, just let me know if they ain't got chicken with bones no more. And so the dude was like, "Nah, man, we just don't sell that here." I was like, ok good, they still got chicken with bones. I'm laughing about it now but when I tell you I was serious then, I meant that. When I got back to Austin, man, I pulled up at the Greyhound and my dad was supposed to pick me up but I just couldn't wait for him, so I hopped in a cab and he turned on the radio and it blew me away. I was like wow a radio in a car and when we pulled on our street, I remember how quiet it was, bro. Like, it was in the middle of the day, and our street was quieter than I ever remember it being, like I never remember our street being that quiet. And he dropped me off and I sat on our steps and I picked up a rake and I started raking the leaves, and I was like, God just to feel normal, right? Something that my mom used to have to beg me to do, I did it, right? And my dad came home, nobody knew I was coming home, so he came home, saw me, took me to see my momma. She used to work up there at Javitos out there in Reagan Hills Center Plaza. She turned around and saw me and just lost it, you know what I mean. So, it was a bittersweet moment, a lot of disappointment because I had gone to prison in the first place, but a lot of happiness because I was home. My dad being who he was, there was a lot of expectation of normalizing yourself, you know, I guess because he had come from the war and he had to normalize himself, I think he thought it was the same process. So, his concern was not—I couldn't just go get a job, I had to get a job that I was qualified for. And since I had a background in accounting and all of this, he insisted that's the kind of work I—you know. So yeah that first day it was all of that in one day, it was talking about jobs, I didn't even have clothes yet, it was, you know, nieces, nephews I hadn't seen, yeah. It was all of that, it was a whole smorgasbord of emotions and events.

HAMILTON: So the term now, I should say in the past decade, has been reentry, but it wasn't called reentry back then when you got out.

CONWAY: It was called getting out of the penitentiary.

HAMILTON: What were the challenges of getting out?

CONWAY: Getting out of the penitentiary, the immediate challenge I faced was living at my momma's house at thirty-one, and having left at eighteen. It was the immediate

challenge of—the first day I woke up in the free world, I was startled awake by this weird noise outside the window, and it was birds. I hadn't heard birds and it scared me, because I hadn't heard birds, yeah, that's how detached you are from the small things in life, that hearing birds in the morning is so alien to you, that you don't know what it is. So, quantify that into relationships, quantify that into trying to find a job, quantify that paradigm into trying to find housing and trying to navigate—I didn't have children then, but imagine trying to navigate into having children. That paradigm of being so startled by birds that it scares you, birds that you've heard all your life, but you're so detached from it that it scares you. So that's where it lands on you is that you're in this whole new world that you are familiar with, but it's brand new to you, because you're somebody else. And, you know, for however long you were in prison, they refer to you in the past tense, however long you were there. So, you were dead, but now that ghost is suddenly alive and they have to interact with this dead person. And our families are not set up for that, our communities are not set up for that. Because when we lock somebody up, we literally consider them to be gone, we're done with you, so when you come home, it's like, we didn't expect this. So that happens on a policy level, it happens on a societal level, but it also happens on a communal level, is that you're entering into this space where people did not expect you to come back to. They have created this story about you that they tell people, that now that story has to be altered because you're home now. So even to this day I meet people who know my sister and didn't know my sister had a brother. So yeah, it's—I don't know if that answers your question, but yeah.

HAMILTON: How many years has it been since you were released from prison?

CONWAY: Eighteen, I got released August 21, 2000. So, August of this year it will be eighteen years.

HAMILTON: So during the course of these eighteen years, some of that reinvention that we talked about earlier, share some of that reinvention throughout the course of these eighteen years.

CONWAY: Absolutely, you know, being a chameleon, prison kind of conditions you to be a chameleon. So, when I came home, I was convinced I wanted to be normal, got married six months after I was out, it lasted twenty-nine days. Didn't want to be into music, got dragged back into music. I gave myself a year to be a rapper, and if it didn't work I was gonna switch lanes, obviously it didn't work. So I got into audio engineering, I got into building websites, I got into graphic design, teaching myself because I couldn't find employment and my parole officer didn't

have any job leads, Texas Workforce didn't have any job leads, Project Rio didn't have any job leads, because no one wanted to hire someone who was convicted of killing somebody. So yeah, I reinvented myself a number of times. When I first came home, I got a job at Seton, I was an imaging clerk, I was a transporter, the guy who hung up the x-rays. Then they found out about my background, and I got fired. Went to St. David's, did the same thing for a little bit, probably about a year. Then I figured out video editing and yeah, so I quit the—probably the dumbest mistake that I ever made, I quit the St. David's, believing that I could make a living off of music videos, because Austin is the Live Music Capital of the world, and there's a thousand bands here. So, I just knew that being a music video director, and we had Austin Music Network at the time, it just made sense, I just didn't realize that 999 of them are broke and so, I didn't do my cost analysis well. So from being a music video director I became an actor, people liked my personality on camera, produced some web series around me, talent manager, became a music publisher, songwriter, record label owner, launched a couple of artists, became a strip club DJ for ten years, author, writer, speaker, yeah. So, reinventing myself for twelve years was to stay out of prison because I couldn't find work, so every time a lane dried up, I found a new lane. When the flyers dried up, it was CD covers, and when the covers dried up, it was bootleg DVDs, when that dried up, it was, you know, mixtapes, so I was always reinventing myself to stay out of prison, then I just became a serial entrepreneur.

HAMILTON: So what do you do now?

CONWAY: I'm a Criminal Justice Organizer for Grassroots Leadership and Texas Advocates for Justice.

HAMILTON: How did you land there?

CONWAY: That is a winding path, right. That's a loaded question, so, I guess the easiest way is to say that I got involved with a group that was called Ex-Offenders Council, that is now the Reentry Advocacy Project, we decided to tackle fair chance hiring. That effort put me on the radar of Grassroots, they wanted to expand their directly impacted staff, so they recruited me as a part-time staff member, and it grew into a full-time position.

HAMILTON: I want to go back to some of those challenges that you had, have you ever experienced homelessness while you were unemployed?

CONWAY: Absolutely, there was a period when my sister and her boyfriend decided to steal my company and I married a woman from Fort Worth and I moved to Fort Worth

for a bit, and that didn't work out. So, because of the streets and my ability to move in certain lanes, I hooked up with the plug in Fort Worth, and he had a barber shop that he ran, and so I slept on the floor of that barber shop for a few months. Prior to that in 2009, when I broke up with my oldest kids' moms, I had a studio up on Cameron Road, the Buttress Building, and I slept on the floor of that for about six months. So yeah, it was homelessness because I couldn't get an apartment in my name, I couldn't get a house in my name and that's what led me into the relationships I ended up in, was because I hooked up with women who had a home or who had an apartment because I couldn't get my own.

HAMILTON: Often formerly incarcerated people describe feelings of being an impostor, do you think that is one of the reasons for reinventing yourself so many times?

CONWAY: I can honestly say that I didn't catch the impostor syndrome until I became semi-visible, I caught the impostor syndrome right around, I think the first time I showed up in the newspaper. I think that's when I caught the impostor syndrome. That's when I felt like, no, this can't be me. I think that's only because prior to that I hid my story for fifteen years, so nobody really knew I had been to prison, so I guess in a sense it was an impostor syndrome. And I don't want you to know why I'm hustling so hard, I don't want you to know why I'm grinding so hard, but while y'all grinding to shine, I'm grinding to stay out of the penitentiary, that's why I'm moving how I move. So the impostor syndrome, maybe so. I just know I never wanted to be Lewis Conway Jr. That was one person I wasn't prepared to be, at all.

HAMILTON: What was some of the ways that you think society misunderstands the criminal justice system or what is justice in society?

CONWAY: I think we have been socially engineered to believe that punishment is the answer, I think we have been socially engineered to believe that once a person goes to prison they have lost their value as a human, they are no longer worthy of certain, not so much rights, like a person who's been to prison isn't even afforded the space of being a victim. So, you lose these layers of humanity based upon your social agility, and so, ask me that question again.

HAMILTON: What does justice look like?

CONWAY: Justice looks like—so I think right now depending on which side of the aisle you stand on, depends on how you see justice. Either you see it as a way to put your white guilt in a place that you're feeling like you're doing something about it, or it puts you in a place to where you realize just how detrimental the criminal justice system has been to certain communities

historically. But I think and I know that the closer people get to the people who have criminal justice involvement, it literally changes their perception. I hear it all the time, like, Man, I have never known anyone who has been to prison but I definitely didn't expect them to be like you. So now you make me think about that uncle who is in prison, or that- now I see them totally different because I see you. So I think there's a triangulated kind of situation that happens, where some people are talking criminal justice reform because it sounds good, and it sells more jails, and then we got folks that's talk about it in a way that it harms your families and it harms them, and then you have that third triangle where it's like, wow, I had no clue, right?

HAMILTON: So what do you say to those people who will say, Lewis, he killed somebody, he should have stayed in prison for twenty years and he deserves to be there, what do you say to them?

CONWAY: So there's two things, before I accepted my story, I lived that truth, I lived that truth of I feel like I'm cursed so I don't deserve to be happy, I don't deserve success, I don't deserve to have a family that cares about me, I don't deserve to have a relationship that works, I don't deserve to be a father, right. But then when you own your story and you realize that we are a sum of our experiences, some of them are good and some of them are bad. But what I have come to find out is that the people who have judged me the harshest, are the ones who have been least affected by my actions. I had the opportunity to meet the father of the man that I killed while I was in the county jail and he showed me a measure of compassion that has me here today, because he forgave me in a space where I couldn't even forgive myself. And hearing him forgive me and having him clear the path that he did for me to do time the way I did time, it has a huge impact on the way I interact now. So, I tell that person that though you may not feel like I deserve compassion, the father of the man I killed did.

HAMILTON: So speaking of fatherhood, you talked about the lack of affection with your own father, and I know you mentioned that you have children, how do you share the experience that you had with being incarcerated and what you were incarcerated for?

CONWAY: So, the only child of mine that I have had that opportunity with is my youngest, and it's because his aunt saw me on TV on a newscast and called his mother. And, you know, in the newscast they called me a convicted killer and so he had to ask his mother what a killer was, a convicted killer was. She told him and she told him I had been to prison, but he needs to ask me what that means and why I went to prison. So maybe just recently, like six or

seven months ago, was the first time I had the opportunity to tell one of my children what happened and why. My oldest kids, their mother used my conviction against me, to gain custody of them, so if they know about my conviction, it's through that lens, it's through something they've heard or something they've been told.

HAMILTON: If you had the opportunity, what would you tell them?

CONWAY: Yeah, daddy was a different person when he was twenty-one, daddy made some decisions that landed him in prison. Daddy sold drugs and daddy killed somebody, and because he killed somebody, he had to go to prison. It's funny is that being a father is the only thing I felt like I did right, in the time I spent in my children's lives before the relationships went sour. Those were the times when you feel like that first question about don't you deserve to still be locked up, I think that may be when that impostor syndrome may have kicked in is being a father, is because that felt so right, that felt so good, like being able to love them and constantly pouring affection on them, constantly telling them the things I didn't get, you know what I mean, constantly hugging on them. You feel like, man, I don't deserve to feel this good, I don't deserve to have created something this amazing.

HAMILTON: So, I'm going to make this my final question.

CONWAY: Absolutely.

HAMILTON: Why are you a member of Texas Advocates for Justice, and what are you working toward?

CONWAY: Again, without being esoteric, Texas Advocates for Justice represents for me the best way for folks who are directly impacted to directly impact policies that directly impact them. Texas Advocates for Justice, you know, in its inception was created to be an organization that was run by people with backgrounds, and so as I look into the future of TAJ, I see TAJ as being one of those few organizations that have organizational power but also has the leadership that comes from people with backgrounds. I joined because I don't want anybody else to go through what I went through on twelve years on parole, not having a network of people who are not trying to the penitentiary, people who stayed out for fifteen years on parole, people who pushed legislation, people who are involved with shifting that triangle of theory, that consent theory of power. Texas Advocates for Justice is the moral spearhead of the criminal justice system when it comes to Travis County, when it comes to Texas. We're the ones who pushed the needle because it's the right thing to do, it's the right thing to do to give people dignity, it's the right thing

to do to make sure people have access to employment. And when you do it for those reasons, then the work has a deeper dive, it has that lasting impact. I think that that's why we do it, right, it's that lasting impact. We may not be able to quantify it in metrics but you can quantify it in the way that people live their lives and have expanded from being involved in TAJ, and the things that they're involved in now, that's how you quantify it. TAJ is the future of what advocacy looks like for formerly incarcerated folks.

HAMILTON: Thank you, it's been a pleasure.

CONWAY: Absolutely. I talk too long? I'm sorry.

[END OF CLIP 2]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]