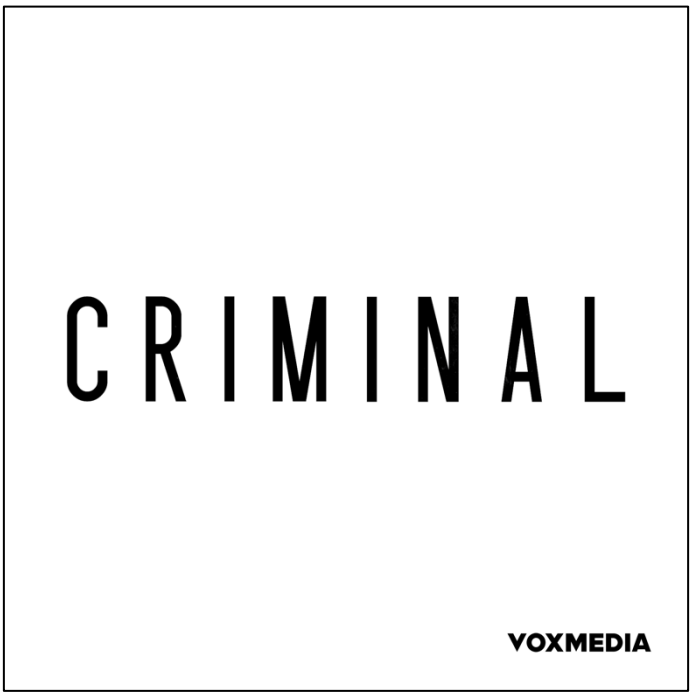


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Episode 265: Under Oath
Air Date: April 19, 2024

RON BISHOP: I grew up in West Baltimore, Sandtown. I come from three different neighborhoods-- Sandtown, Harlem Park, and what we call the Avenue. I grew up one of nine kids, hard working father, very loving family. We were very close, and we're still close today.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) This is Ron Bishop. He's the youngest of all of his siblings. And he has a twin brother named Don. He remembers sometimes people wouldn't be able to tell them apart and just called both of them "Ron Don."

RON BISHOP: I just think of my childhood as having fun all the time. And there were times when my father would get laid off, and he never missed a beat. A lot of things we didn't have, but I'll always tell people that we never considered ourselves poor because we were happy. And as kids, there were things you couldn't have, but I could say didn't miss it because you had fun. You grew up in a neighborhood full of kids.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: What kind of things would you do with kids in the neighborhood? Were you always outside playing?

RON BISHOP: All the time, yes, like, this for any major city. If you grew up in a row home just in one a one-block radius, you will have kids. You will have maybe 10 to 30 kids in one-block radius. So my block, we had at least 20 of us. And we became like that whole Sandtown, Harlem Park family.

PHOEBE JUDGE: So there's always someone to run around with?

RON BISHOP: All the time, all the time. And back then, kids used to look for other kids to play with. And let's say, you might meet a kid for the very first time, and then that particular kid would end up being your best friend for a long time.

PHOEBE JUDGE: When did you meet DeWitt Duckett?

RON BISHOP: Oh, gosh, [LAUGHS] it's making me laugh because I met DeWitt Duckett- first grade. So that would put us at 1975, I think. And he sat beside me.

And he was a very quiet kid. Actually, he was the tallest kid in the class. And he didn't say-- we didn't say much to each other. We just, like, he would ask to borrow a pencil, but he was a really nice guy.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Over the years, Ron and DeWitt got to know each other better. They'd play at the playground even after DeWitt transferred to a different school nearby. When Ron was in eighth grade, his oldest brother George was in the army. He returned home just before Christmas in 1982. One night in January, George had plans to meet up with friends at Shake and Bake, a complex that had a roller skating rink.

RON BISHOP: And he told us-- he told my sister, "I'll be back." And maybe an hour later we got a phone call or I actually, I took the phone call. And when I answered the phone, it was a family friend. And he just right away, he just told me that he got shot.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) George died. He was 22 years old. Ron later learned that George had accidentally bumped into someone.

RON BISHOP: And when he went to say, excuse me, the guy really didn't accept it well when my brother said what was told to me. He said, hey, I just said, excuse me, but the guy just couldn't accept the apology. So one word led to the other.

My brother said, "Well, forget it." So as he walked away, that's when he shot him in the back. And when we heard that news we were, like, wait a minute. The way we grew up and what my father taught us, like, you walk away from situations.

You don't argue with people. And when you say what you have to say, just keep it moving. So to hear that my brother was a peacemaker and when he walked away and how the guy just shot him for no reason, it was very bad for us.

PHOEBE JUDGE: JUDGE (AS NARRATOR): (As narrator) Ron started ninth grade the fall after his brother died. He was surprised to see his old friend DeWitt Duckett back at the same school as him.

RON BISHOP: When he popped up in my ninth grade class, I'm like, whoa, what are you doing here? He looked at me, like, as if he didn't remember me. I'm like, come on, man, you know who I am.

And that was he was, you know what? He was a jokester, too. He'll try to downplay things and be silly, like, almost had like that Mr. Bean or Benny Hill type of humor.

PHOEBE JUDGE: So you totally reconnected?

RON BISHOP: Oh, yes, right away.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron says their school, Harlem Park Junior High, was tough.

RON BISHOP: And a lot of kids who graduated moved on or just dropped out will come back and hang out at the school. So there was always this potential for like, bullies or getting into fights.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Did you and DeWitt spent a lot of time together? Did you try to stay away from all of that?

RON BISHOP: All the time. We took a hallway- myself, DeWitt, and another friend of ours from the neighborhood. We used to take this hallway, this empty lonely hallway just to avoid the crowds because you always get caught up in some stuff in the hallways.

And back then, some kids would not use their manners and say, excuse me. You can get bumped. And back then, if you got bumped, then that was a sign of aggression. And if the person didn't say excuse me, then there's the potential to get in a fight. So we would like to avoid all of that stuff by just taking this other hallway.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) One day that fall when it was a little cooler outside, DeWitt came to school wearing a Georgetown Basketball Starter jacket.

RON BISHOP: I'm like, whoa, what are you doing with that? That's a pretty good jacket. And back then, if you had a starter jacket, you were looked upon as a really cool guy. So for him to even have a George- actually, he was the first one I saw with a Georgetown jacket. And we were all amazed that he had it.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Explain what a Georgetown jacket was. What did it look like? And why were they so special?

RON BISHOP: See, Georgetown, let me see, because back then no one really never heard of Georgetown. And when Georgetown basketball team came to prominence, they had an almost all Black team. But what made Georgetown special was they had two local Baltimoreans on their team, Reggie Williams and David Wingate.

When they're in Georgetown, they're representing Baltimore, East Baltimore, or Baltimore. So that was a special thing for us because, hey, it's like, hey, these are local guys. And they're playing on a national championship team or soon to be national championship team.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) DeWitt was wearing his Georgetown jacket one day that November when he, Ron, and a friend of theirs were walking to lunch. As usual, they took the quiet hallway. It was empty that day.

RON BISHOP: And that's when someone came up from behind us, and he grabbed DeWitt by the arm by the back. But he had the gun-- as I turned, he had the gun in my face. So the gun was within like few inches of my face. So that's when the gun went-- he took the gun, and then he put it in the back of DeWitt's neck.

I tried to get the attention from our friend, that's when he saw the guy with the gun. And then he started running, and I started running behind this friend. And so as we're running, we're approaching the C unit hallway. And there, I mean, there's a stairwell. So as soon as we go through the double doors and down the stairs, that's when we hear the gunshot.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So as we go downstairs and we enter the cafeteria, that's where we see Mr. English, the unit principal. And so we went straight to him and said, "Hey, we think DeWitt got shot." And he said, "what?" Like that.

And as soon as we told Mr. English-- we're standing in the middle of the cafeteria. As soon as we told Mr. English, that's when DeWitt came through the double doors of the cafeteria. And he ran. He saw us right there standing, so he ran to us.

And by the time he got to us, he collapsed and Mr. English arms. And that's when he got the attention from other students who were sitting. And you're talking about cafeteria that might have 300 students at that time. And when he collapsed, that's when you hit a gasp, like, [GASPS] students saying [GASPS]. And then that's when Mr. English walked him out.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) I'm Phoebe Judge. This is *Criminal.*

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: When DeWitt ran into the cafeteria, could you tell that he was bleeding that he had been shot?

RON BISHOP: Yeah, because he was holding his neck. And he was like, he was running but limping. And he was-- put it this way, he was struggling to run.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) After DeWitt was taken out of the cafeteria, Ron and his friend had no idea what to do next.

RON BISHOP: So we just said, you know what? Let's just leave school.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron's friend lived across the street from the school, but Ron lived about a mile away. He asked his friend to walk home with him.

RON BISHOP: And we waited a while, and then Baltimore City Patrol car pulled up and an officer got out. And he started talking to us. And then he asked me or he asked us to go down to what we call the main police station downtown Baltimore.

So when we get to the police station the patrol officer walked us up to the homicide department. And when we get there, we sit in the lobby. And then eventually, I think, I meet Donald Kincaid. He seemed like a very nice man.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Donald Kincaid was the detective assigned to the case.

RON BISHOP: And he introduced himself while the patrol officer was sitting there with us. And I have to point this out. Out of nowhere, the patrol officer told Donald Kincaid this, he said, "The big one," meaning me, "told the smaller one," the other witness that was with us, that I told him not to say anything. And that just blew me away because I never said that.

So when the patrol officer left the room, I told Donald Kincaid like, hey, I never said that. I don't know why the officer told you that. I never told the other witness to not say anything.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Donald Kincaid took Ron into an interview room. Ron told him what he could remember about the person who shot DeWitt, which wasn't much. He'd been wearing a gray hoodie and had dark skin and a faint mustache.

RON BISHOP: During the interview, Donald Kincaid he left, came back a few minutes, that's when he told me that DeWitt didn't make it. And I'm looking at him like, 'what do you mean he didn't make it' because when I saw him, it looked like he was okay.

Even though he was shot, it didn't seem like it was a big deal because he had enough strength to run and get to us in the cafeteria. So your mind, my mind is racing. And I'm getting this empty feeling, like, I got when my brother got shot.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So when Donald Kincaid told me, I'm experiencing my brother's death all over again. And I'm like, what is happening? And you're in a state of shock.

You don't know what to do. You're just sitting there. And of course, you have to sit through this interview to a- to answer more questions.

PHOEBE JUDGE: How long did they keep you?

RON BISHOP: I would say several hours. I can't give you a distinct- or like two or three hours. I know it was several hours. By the time I left out of homicide department, it was nighttime.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) The same patrol officer who had picked Ron up earlier drove him home.

RON BISHOP: And this officer, he never dropped me off at my house. He dropped me off a block away and told me I had to get out and walk. And I'm like, "Huh?" He said, "You can get out right here and walk." I'm like, OK.

And as I'm walking down to the house, like, you're paranoid. You're seeing things. You don't know if someone's going to come out of an alley behind a car and shoot you. So by the time knocked on the door, my mother was there.

And she asked me what happened. I had to go through everything. And they were just-- they was heartbroken to know that a classmate, a good friend of mine was shot. And she treated his death as my brother's death.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) DeWitt Duckett's death made the front page of the *Baltimore Sun* the next day. According to the school's security chief, it was the first time that a student had been murdered inside a Baltimore public school. The *Sun* reported, "The victim's two companions told police that... a teenage boy came up from behind, grabbed the collar of the Duckett youth's coat, waved a gun, and said, "Give me your jacket."" Police also said that there had been no other students nearby when the shooting happened.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What was it like to go to school? I mean, was everyone in the school talking about what had happened and who had done it?

RON BISHOP: No one knew, no one knew who done it. But everyone was, I mean, the whole school was shocked. And you see students crying or talking about it, like, why would someone do this to him because he was a nice guy. He didn't have not a bad reputation at all.

And, when we got to class and my homeroom class, we had my homeroom teacher who was Mr. Dozier. And so as soon as we all sat down and he looked at us, and he said, you know what? I'm sorry to hear about what happened to DeWitt, something like that.

And he said, things like this happen, unfortunately. And then he started crying. When he cried, then almost the whole class started crying. So it was a very emotional thing for us.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) DeWitt's mother Franzelle Duckett told the *Baltimore Evening Sun* that the Georgetown jacket had been one of DeWitt's prized possessions and that it was the first thing he bought when he got his first paycheck from a summer job. He'd bought it for $75. She said DeWitt bought a lot of his own clothes and wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer when he grew up. She was divorced from DeWitt's father, and DeWitt had always told her he'd take care of her when he was older.

In the days after the shooting, Detective Kincaid stopped by Ron's house several times to question him further. He would show Ron a collection of Polaroid photos of teenagers and ask Ron if any of them had been involved in the shooting. Ron recognized some of the boys, three 16-year-olds named Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart. Ron told Detective Kincaid it wasn't any of them.

RON BISHOP: They were all guys I knew from the neighborhood. And not only that, they also attended Harlem Park Elementary Junior High. I mean, Andrew and I, we go back to least maybe six or seven.

And we used to play at a playground we called the Curry Street playground. What made that playground so special was they had a tire swing. And Andrew and I would take time swinging each other.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Andrew, Alfred, and Ransom were two years older than Ron, but they'd been seen at the school the day DeWitt was shot by some staff members who reported seeing a group of older teenagers hanging out and goofing around in the hallways. But Ron said it wasn't them. Detective Kincaid kept coming by. Once he showed up twice in one day, the second time past midnight. Ron's mother had to wake him up.

RON BISHOP: And Donald Kincaid he's a smooth tall guy at the moment or at that time, very nice guy. But then I could tell when I told him I don't recognize anyone that was involved in DeWitt shooting in those pictures, and he looked very tired and frustrated. That I do remember. And then he left.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) The next day, Ron went to DeWitt's funeral.

RON BISHOP: And at the same time, it's like I'm reliving my brother's funeral as well. So it was the most strangest emptiest feeling ever. I'm like, this is just a few months apart, and I'm back at someone else's funeral again. And I'm like, this is so sad.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Later that evening, a patrol car showed up at Ron's house. Detective Kincaid wanted to speak with him again this time, at the police headquarters. Some officers picked him up without checking in with Ron's parents.

RON BISHOP: This time when I get there, Donald Kincaid he's flat. He's all business. He's serious this time.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron remembers Detective Kincaid showed him the Polaroid photo line up again and again asked Ron who shot DeWitt.

RON BISHOP: I'm like, well, none of these people or none of the persons here I recognize as the shooter. He said, oh, yes, you do.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So he and I go back and forth. We kept going back and forth. How long this lasted I don't know. But what I really remember is he made a statement of, you know what? You're not going to leave here. Your ass is not going to leave here.

If I have to, I'm going to keep your ass here the whole night. And I told him, well, I guess you're going to have to keep me here the whole night because I don't know what you're talking about. And it went back and forth. And that's when his voice escalated.

He got really tense, clenched fists, all this stuff. And then he said, well, I think, it was I ought to put your goddamn head through that wall or the window. I know he mentioned wall and window.

So I'm like, well, I guess you're going to have to put my head through this wall or window because I don't know what you're talking about. We went back and forth. And you could tell he was super frustrated, angry.

So he said, you're going to pick tonight, you're going to pick. And I told him, I'm not picking anything. And then he started making gestures to his gun. And when you grow up in an all-Black neighborhood and you see what officers do to people in my neighborhood, like, innocent people not just criminals, but innocent people, then you can't trust this officer.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron says he was feeling more and more scared. He started pointing to different Polaroids in front of him. According to Ron, after the first few photos, Detective Kincaid would say, Nope, keep going.

RON BISHOP: And when I pointed to Alfred Chestnut he said, he was the shooter, right? And I'm like, I don't know. He said, he was the shooter. Then I realized that's who he want me to say. He wants me to say Alfred is the shooter.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron says slowly Detective Kincaid also guided him to Andrew Stewart and Ransom Watkins who he seemed to think were Alfred's accomplices. And then he placed a statement in front of Ron to sign. Ron didn't feel like he had a choice.

RON BISHOP: And as I'm signing this statement, all that frustration or anger it goes to happiness. He's like overjoyed, like, oh, I solved this case.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) I mean, you must have felt terrible, but also been relieved because you had been so terrified about what Detective Kincaid was going to do to you.

RON BISHOP: Actually, I just felt terrible.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron wasn't the only witness who identified the three teenagers. Earlier that day, police had spoken with a 13-year-old who school security had called a "possible witness." She also identified Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew.

That's when Ron was brought to police headquarters. Two more students-- one of them was the student who'd been with Ron and DeWitt in the hallway the day of the shooting-- were also brought in. None of them were accompanied by a parent.

One of the kid's mothers showed up at the police station to find him. He could hear her from the interrogation room yelling, "Let him out." By the end of that night, the police had four witnesses, including Ron, who all identified Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

We'll be right back.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart were arrested very early on Thanksgiving morning 1983 and charged with first-degree murder. A police spokesperson told the *Baltimore Sun* they issued warrants after they, quote, "Finally came up with some more eyewitnesses." Police had found a Georgetown Starter jacket in Alfred Chestnut's room when they arrested him, but his mother told *The Sun* that she'd bought it for him and that she had a receipt to prove it.

Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew- who had become known as the Harlem Park 3- would be tried as adults. They were 16. Ron was 14.

RON BISHOP: I thought of them like, oh my God, I'm putting them in the worst situation possible. They're juveniles or they're basically teenagers, but they're going to an adult prison. So that stayed in my mind all the time, like, how are they going to survive in prison?

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) A date was set for the trial. Ron met with the prosecutor, a man named Jonathan Shoup, to prepare to testify. The three other witnesses were there, too, as well as Detective Donald Kincaid.

RON BISHOP: And Donald Kincaid was right there in the states attorney's or prosecutor's office. And he was there to monitor or supervise to make sure our word or the statements we gave him coincide with what the prosecutor wanted us to say. So as we're rehearsing-- and that's all it was, it was scripted.

And the prosecutors telling us, OK, this is what happened. And I couldn't even really say it because these are all lies. So I'm stumbling. I can't get my words together because you want me to lie.

And then eventually, I sat down. And the other three witnesses, they got up. They knocked it out. They had everything.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron remembers Jonathan Shoup praising the three other witnesses, but he was confused because he suspected two of them hadn't even seen the shooting.

RON BISHOP: So when Donald Kincaid left the room, that's when I approached Jonathan Shoup and said, you know what? And I had to be careful on how I phrased my words.

I said, you know what?

Mr. Shoup, this stuff you're all saying in this room, it really didn't go this way. It didn't really go this way. I couldn't come out and tell him hey, Donald Kincaid is lying. So I told him, hey, it really didn't go this way. And that's when he said, OK, just go over there and sit like no big deal.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron didn't really know what else to do.

RON BISHOP: You don't approach-- and my frame of mind back then, these are two white men. And one is an attorney, and the other one is a detective.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) The day of the trial, Ron says he wanted to get up on the stand and tell the truth. He says he'd been told he'd be the first witness to testify. But when he got there, he realized he would actually be the last. The three other witnesses had already testified.

Ron says he felt a little thrown off by that, and that when he got up on the witness stand, he remembers it already felt like a done deal. The jury seemed tired and unfocused. So in the end, Ron told the same story the witnesses before him had.

At one point, a defense attorney brought up the fact that Ron's testimony went against the written statement he'd given on November 18, the day of the murder that only one person had attacked DeWitt. But it didn't matter. After three hours of deliberation, the jury found Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart guilty. They were sentenced to life in prison.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: What did you think?

RON BISHOP: I'm like, this is because of me. I'm sending these guys to prison. But at the same time, I've been set up, framed to frame these guys to send them to prison.

So you're feeling guilty. For one, you lose a good friend. And at the same time, you sending three other Black kids to prison for the rest of their lives.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Something else had happened at the trial that Ron couldn't stop thinking about. As Detective Kincaid had walked him through the hall of the courthouse right before testifying, someone he knew from around the neighborhood came up to them.

His name was Michael Willis.

He was 18. He asked Ron if he was going to testify. And then, according to Ron, Michael Willis looked at Detective Kincaid, and Detective Kincaid winked at him.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Tell me a little bit about who he was.

RON BISHOP: He was well known in the neighborhood, but more so well known just being no good, like, someone who's always starting trouble, someone who hangs out with a group of guys who bully and start trouble with younger kids and all that stuff, and just had a no good reputation.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron had had another odd encounter with Michael Willis a few days after DeWitt was shot. He'd seen Michael outside his school, and Michael had called out to him using the nickname people called Ron and his twin brother.

RON BISHOP: He said, "Ron-Don, if anyone tries to take your jacket, just let me know. I'll take care of them for you." And I'm looking at him like, what are you talking about?

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron thought it was strange. He didn't really know Michael Willis that well. And it seemed like he was referencing DeWitt's Georgetown Starter jacket. But Ron says he hadn't really told anyone that he'd been with DeWitt when he was killed.

RON BISHOP: And I never made it-- it took me a while to make the connection. I'm like, why would he tell me this? And how would he know?

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron says that back on the night Detective Kincaid was showing him Polaroids in the interrogation room saying, nope, keep going, Michael Willis's photo had been in the stack. But Ron says he didn't think anything of it at the time. During the trial, Michael Willis's name briefly came up when a school security guard testified that he'd seen Michael on school grounds the day DeWitt was shot.

In the months after the trial, Ron thought more and more about Michael Willis. He'd sometimes see him wearing a Georgetown Starter jacket. And Ron says he couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said on the witness stand. But he didn't think there was anyone he could go to at this point.

RON BISHOP: Who could I tell, Secret Service? Write a letter to back then Ronald Reagan. Like, if you can't trust a detective and you can't trust a prosecutor, a assistant state's attorney, who can you trust?

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) For the rest of the school year, Ron didn't return to the hallway where the shooting happened until the day of his junior high graduation.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

He walked through the hall and said a little prayer for DeWitt.

Ron started high school, but he struggled to stay focused in class.

RON BISHOP: I realized when I would take quizzes or tests, my mind will wander off. And I'll get stuck into the death of my brother, DeWitt, the whole trial. So you can get overwhelmed. So I learned how to just block it all off, always stayed on my mind, but I learned how to block it out.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron joined the football, track, and wrestling teams in school and eventually went to Coppin State University in Baltimore. He majored in psychology and became a counselor. He got married and had two kids. He got divorced.

He often had jobs working with kids who had learning difficulties or behavioral issues. He still lived in Baltimore and kept in touch with people from his childhood. And then in 2002, he heard Michael Willis had been shot and killed.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

We'll be right back.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

For decades, Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart maintained their innocence in prison. Alfred Chestnut spent a lot of time trying to get a hold of the police reports about DeWitt Duckett's murder. During the trial, the prosecutor kept some of the reports from the defense attorneys. But 34 years into their life sentences, in 2018, through a public information request, Alfred finally got them. He sent them to the state's attorney's office where they were reviewed by Lauren Lipscomb who leads the Conviction Integrity Unit.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: And reviewing those police records what struck me was that there was another person that had been identified by several witnesses in the police records.

PHOEBE JUDGE: A person is like- another suspect?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: Yes.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) The suspect was Michael Willis, who had died in the years since DeWitt's death.

PHOEBE JUDGE: So for the first time you were reading that there had at one time not been such a clear-cut answer to who had done this?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: Right.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) In the reports, Lauren read that one young woman the police had interviewed after DeWitt's murder said that she heard Michael Willis had been at the school that day and that he, quote, "Had a gun, and threw the gun down and ran away with some other boys." Someone else told the police they heard that Willis took the Georgetown jacket and wore the jacket to the skating rink at Shake and Bake. But Lauren couldn't find anything to show that the police had followed the leads about Michael Willis.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: And that presented a conflict that was really glaring. And that is really what caused me to initiate a full-blown investigation into this case.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Lauren Lipscomb had also read through the trial transcripts.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: One of the things that I noticed about the testimony of the four kids was that it seemed that it was very similar, that their testimonies were similar to each other. And it struck me that they didn't seem to be able to answer any detailed questions.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Lauren started reaching out to the witnesses. Ron Bishop hadn't heard anything about the case in years, but always thought about it.

RON BISHOP: Then I get a letter from the state's attorney's office. And I'm reading it. It says, Alfred Chestnut et al, and they want to see me immediately. And they want to reinvestigate this case.

So they need my input. So they want to schedule an interview. So I just-- for a few days, I didn't respond. And then eventually I did.

And I prepared myself. I'm like, I don't know what I'm getting into. This might be a trap because my experience as a 14-year-old, it was so horrendous.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron didn't know exactly why Lauren was re-investigating the case. He didn't know why she wanted to see him. So at first, he didn't reply.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: I think that our contact was really jarring for him. And I find this in most of the investigations that we undertake. He was very concerned about being in touch with the state.

We are the state attorney's office. And so that we're a law enforcement agency. And so there's a certain amount of anxiety that a lot of people have in talking to our office.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) He worried that he would get in trouble for lying on the stand 35 years earlier.

RON BISHOP: So I prepared myself. I said, well, either whatever I have to say, I'm going to be honest. And if I have to go to jail over this, I have to go to jail because those guys should never been in prison.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron told Lauren everything. He told her that only one person had attacked DeWitt, not three. He said he lied in court. He said he felt threatened and pushed to identify Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: In his describing that to us, what was striking was that he didn't seem to really appreciate the gravity of that. It seemed as though-- from what he described, it seemed as though the police and the prosecutor told him that this is the way it's done. We tell you what to say when you take the stand, and we tell you how to testify on the stand. And you will get in trouble if you don't do it this way.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What did you think when you heard this? I mean, as a prosecutor yourself, what did you think?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: Anger actually comes to mind. It was a foreign set of events from my own experience being a prosecutor. And so I would even say a little bit of incredulousness that this actually happened because I am cognizant of the fact that the case occurred about 36 years prior.

And so I there was a certain amount of incredulousness of just over, was this how things were done 36 years ago? This is completely unacceptable. So those are the things that were going through my mind.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Lauren and Ron visited the hallway where the shooting happened. Ron hadn't been back since the day of his junior high graduation. Ron told us it was strange and hard to relive things, but also that the whole thing made him feel hopeful. If someone like Lauren was looking this deeply into the case, he thought maybe it meant that Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew would be able to come home soon.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: By the time he was done telling us, giving us information, and answering our questions, he had cried a bit and ultimately was very thankful for-- and that actually struck me was that he thanked us for persisting and bringing him in so that he could, in fact, get this off of his chest. It was almost like a cathartic moment or something for him. He was very sorry about just everything.

It seemed as though he would have been carrying around a lot of guilt. And what struck us was that at some point during this interview, when we said, well, who shot the victim? Do you know who shot the victim? And he said, "Yes, Michael Willis."

PHOEBE JUDGE: And in the part of you that thought, well, if this did happen, were you thinking we've got a big problem here?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: Absolutely.

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It became a full-blown emergency to get the rest of these interviews done to complete our investigation. It was a full-blown emergency, yes.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Lauren was able to track down the three other witnesses, the boy who had been with DeWitt and Ron in the hallway and the two other classmates who Ron suspected hadn't even seen the shooting.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: They all said the same thing that they were told what to say. They were told to get with the program and were threatened that if they weren't going to say what they were supposed to-- that they would be in trouble if they didn't say exactly what they were told to say. They all talked about that. And none of them have been in touch with each other since school.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Lauren Lipscomb decided she was going to do everything in her power to get Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew out of prison by Thanksgiving 2019, exactly 36 years since their arrest. She began working on a report to submit to Marilyn Mosby, the state's attorney at the time in Baltimore. And then she submitted it.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: About a week later, I got noticed that we were going to agree to release.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Six days before Thanksgiving, Lauren and State Attorney Marilyn Mosby visited Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew in prison to let them know that they'd be going home.

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: I would say that each of them shared a similar reaction, which was a look of disbelief. It was almost a surreal look of disbelief.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Three days later, the three of them were brought to a Baltimore courthouse. It was the first time Alfred and Ransom had seen each other in almost 25 years. And then the judge began the proceedings to send the three men home.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What was the reaction in the courtroom?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: You could hear a pin drop. It's very quiet while I read through the highlights of the investigation. And the court, the judge was clearly shocked by what he heard and let the courtroom know and apologized to Mr. Stewart, Mr. Watkins, and Mr. Chestnut.

PHOEBE JUDGE: I mean, is it cases like this where you think to yourself, oh, thank God he wrote in, that thank God, I read that letter?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: Yes. I don't know that I can really fully wrap my head around how significant of a horror story that is for everyone involved to include the victim's family who did not get justice served. For everybody involved, Mr. Bishop, our other witnesses, Mr. Chestnut, Mr. Watkins, Mr. Stewart, and for the victim's family, justice was not served in this case.

PHOEBE JUDGE: How did this whole thing happen? I mean, what failed?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: It really is impossible-- years later, it is impossible to definitively assign blame to any particular person. It's not just one person. It's not one police officer.

It's not one police detective. It's not even one prosecutor because we have other prosecutors. We've got team captains. We've got supervisors who are reviewing the material that's going to the grand jury. And so you've got multiple eyes along the way.

And so what becomes critical is really going back to looking at the police reports and wondering, why did they not investigate the Michael Willis identification that had been made by several people? Why does that not appear to have been investigated fully? That was not tracked down. That was not followed for whatever reason.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Do you understand why Ron did what he did?

LAUREN LIPSCOMB: I do. What we know now about the psychology and the brain science as to just human brain development is such that I can only imagine that as a teenager having multiple meetings with adults, and he to a certain extent is trusting what the detectives are saying, what the prosecutor is saying. He doesn't want to get into any trouble. And if they're telling him this is what you're supposed to do, he, I believe in good faith, is trusting what they say that yes, he is supposed to say what they tell him to say. That's the way it's done in court.

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PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) In March, 2020, the state of Maryland decided to award Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew $2.9 million each. And in August that year, the three men filed a lawsuit against the Baltimore Police Department, specifically naming Detective Donald Kincaid. In the lawsuit, their attorneys write, quote, "At 108 combined years, the Harlem Park 3 collectively served more years stemming from a wrongful conviction than any other case in American history."

Last year, the city of Baltimore approved a $48 million settlement to Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew. The chief legal counsel for the Baltimore Police Department said that the number could have been even higher than that. Quote, "These are men who went to jail as teens and came out as young grandfathers."

We reached out to the Baltimore Police Department and to Detective Kincaid- who is now retired- and haven't heard back. In 2021, reporter Jennifer Gonnerman wrote a story about Ron for the *New Yorker.* She met with Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew to interview them and beforehand asked Ron if there was anything he wanted her to pass along. He wrote several paragraphs.

RON BISHOP: And what I told them was, I'm sorry this happened. I remembered them when we were kids. And I talked about Andrew. He and I were racing each other and pushing me on the swing.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Ron wrote, "Knowing who you guys were made it so difficult to be on the witness stand, especially knowing you were all innocent."

RON BISHOP: And I did say, well, if one day if you all want to, I can sit down with you all and apologize in person.

PHOEBE JUDGE: (As narrator) Jennifer Gonnerman shared what Ron wrote with Alfred, Ransom, and Andrew. After, Ransom said, "For me, that's everything. Sometimes in life, that's all you want. You just want people to recognize that, man, I messed up. And for that, I apologize."

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Criminal is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our Senior Producer. Katie Bishop is our Supervising Producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson, Jackie Sojico, Lilly Clark, Lene Sillesen, and Gabrielle Berbey.

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