

James-Williams-Audio

Hi everyone, my name is Gracie Ambrant. I'm an intern here at the Center for the Study of Tennesseans and War and today I have a special guest. This is Dr. James Williams.

Do you want to introduce yourself? Yeah, my name is Dr. James Williams. Well, that's what people call me or they call me Dr. Littlest. I'm an associate professor in Retail Hospitality and Tourism Management and I teach leadership, human resource management, and all of the legal issues classes.

So I try to teach students how not to get sued, but how to make the best decisions as a manager or leader in those respective fields. Awesome. So before we get started with like actual interview questions, I think that people are going to be interested to know, Dr. Littlest, where did that, how did that come about? What's the story behind that? So the story is basically I made a lot of bad decisions when I was younger.

I limited my thinking and the story really started back when I lived in Fall River, Massachusetts. And Fall River, it's about 95% white, but I didn't even realize it was a such thing as white and black. And when I used to go to school, the kids used to say it was in a mafia.

And I'm like, what is the mafia? I never knew really what the mafia was. And then one day when I came home from school and I'm working my crayons, my mother was like, I need to tell you all something because I saw you talking to this girl in school. And I was like, she was like, you're black.

And I'm like, and really, I was really puzzled. I was like, what does that mean that I'm black? Cause I said, I'm brown. Like my color is brown.

I was learning about colors. And my mom was like, no, but you're black in this world. And I was like, huh? And then she was starting to show me people white.

And then she said this person was Chinese. And now that I know the person was Asian, she probably didn't know what they were, but it always confused me. So, and I felt like it limited my thinking by thinking that I needed to buy into a lot of these social constructs.

And when I was younger, I got into a lot of fights and I got into a lot of trouble. And I took that from when we left Fort Worth, Massachusetts back to Wilson, North Carolina. So at a very young age, I lost my virginity.

I was selling drugs. I had two kids before I got out of school. So I limited my way of thinking.

And then I went to college to play football, but I had to go to a division three school. And when I got put out of college because I almost got into some gang violence, almost shot somebody, I joined the Air Force. And when I went in, I said, I'm not going to be J-Rock.

I'm not going to be a football player. I'm going to just try to live a life to where whoever could bring positive love and positivity into me, that's what I'm going to embrace. And that sort of created this limitless mindset.

And it allowed me to do a lot of things, write books, play professional arena football, bodybuild and speak all over the world. So then my brother was like, no, you're not a limitless. There's no limits to you.

So that's where the name comes from. I just, I don't buy into social constructs. It's all about connecting with individual spirits.

Right. I love that. That was a good question on my part, because that was like a perfect sneak peek introduction to what we're going to get into.

That was perfect. So let's just start, you know, with the very beginning. Tell me about where you were born, your early life, your childhood.

Okay. So I was born in Wilson, North Carolina. It's a little small town, probably about 55,000 people, grew maybe 10,000 more.

And then my mother divorced my biological father. So my name was James Cromel. And when she remarried, my father adopted us that I consider my father.

His name is Jimmy Williams. And then it was just like in the South or in this type of family with religion and all that, you don't really talk about it. You just move on.

And it just felt like, you know, God would take care of all these things. But it hit a lot of, you know, it was this internal fight in me of like, well, who am I? You know, why didn't my father want me? So it was always me trying to prove myself, you know, so I try to do it with sports. I try to do it with violence, but I realized it still was a very empty feeling where I never had love.

So that's really the genesis of where my mind started. And I feel like a lot of people have trauma, you know, and for me, it was the trauma of trying to fit in, you know, and I had to face that later on in life and realize it's irrelevant. It's really about living for something greater.

And that's kind of my background story, skipping over a lot of stuff in middle school, high school. Yeah. And how awesome is it, you know, I mean, beautiful even that so many of us share similar stories.

I mean, I'm sure that there's so many people out there who have such a similar story to yours, but it's still so individual and so different. I think that that's awesome. And you have, you've got such a powerful testimony of, of being able to, to change your life.

And so you said that you, you wanted to play football in college. Yeah. Yeah.

So I was, I was a good football player. And it was one of those things that I learned at a very young age while I was dealing with all of the trauma of, you know, not having my father. I remember my brother gave me a football and told me to run.

And we was at, this was a headstart. So at the school program and when I ran, they couldn't tackle me. And just the praise and attention I got from that, you know, as a five, six, seven year old, one of the, one of those ages, it just felt good.

And I was like, man, I could do something great because I never saw myself as an academic, you know, school came easy, but in my environment, and this was the kids that said it was mafia. Now I know they was white. We was all poor, you know? And I don't think nobody really ever saw themselves as being a scholar or whatever, but I used to always look at the people that had the briefcases back then, or they wear the, you know, the suits.

And I was like, man, I wonder what they do. So it was always that curiosity that I had at a young age, but I think playing football at a young age. And then when I moved back to North Carolina, playing in middle school, I was, I was great at it.

And then I was good in high school. And then when you start getting recruited, you start thinking, this is what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life. So when that chapter closed in college, I was depressed.

I didn't know what to do. And the military was the only option that I thought could really change my life. So, so at what point did you start thinking, okay, maybe had, had you ever before in your life considered the military? Was this like something that out of the blue, like maybe this could work for me? How did that come about? No, that's a funny question.

I used to pick on people that used to wear the uniform, you know? So, you know, in high school, you have the ROTC. I was like, man, they corny. Why would they ever wear that? You know, I'd never do that.

Right. Because I really believed in my mind, I'm going to be the next, at that time, Barry Sanders was big or Bojax. I'm gonna be the next, I'm that guy.

And, and once that door closed, you know, I started looking at people in my life. I knew my stepdad had went to the Navy, my brother to get away from his troubles. He joined the Navy, had a cousin that joined the Navy.

And then I had a cousin in the Army and all of them was like, look, go to the Air Force. Don't do that. Don't do that.

And I would love to say that it was like, yeah, I just had this inspiration that it was the Air Force, but I didn't have no other options. I didn't know what I was going to do. And because I had two kids, I think that even pushed me more to where it was a bad thing and, you know, having two kids out of wedlock.

But I think the pressure of knowing I got to take care of them, you know, so I had to do something and I didn't want to sell drugs. I didn't want to, you know, go to prison or nothing like that. So the only option was the Air Force.

And when I, I literally went to MEPS, going into the Army National Guard, because it was going to offer me 35,000 and it was like a fueller, a tanker. So, and I, and I didn't know 9-11 would happen. So right in the thick of everything.

But I met this girl there and I'm saying this, my wife knows, the girl was absolutely gorgeous. And she was like, she's going into the Air Force. And I was like, do all the women look like you in the Air Force? And she was like, we have the prettier women.

So that really changed my mind. So that's what ended up. And then I met my wife in the Air Force.

So, you know, it all worked out. I love that. I feel like people, or at least me, I don't want to speak, you know, for everyone.

But especially when I was younger, I kind of had this idea of anybody who served must have had this like revelation of patriotism and defending their country. But in reality, that's not how it goes a lot of the times. And I feel like sometimes, you know, as we start to learn that, we can almost start to, you know, question and that sort of thing.

But I still think, I think that deciding to serve, no matter what reasons you have behind it, it's so powerful. You, I think, I think no matter what your reason behind it is, you have to be a special type of person to make that decision, period. I agree.

And I would say to add on to that, I think I didn't go in very patriotic, right. But I think after going through the, I don't know why I'm drawing a blank, but we used to call it, every night we would play the national anthem and go through all the different things. You start buying into that, you know, and then you start becoming more patriotic, wearing a uniform.

It was special to me. It meant something to me. So being that now I get to work with the Air Force and I get to see the young Airmen, you know, it's just a beautiful experience.

And to know that I can always relate to a veteran, regardless of the branch they're in. They used to call us the chair force, but it's all good. I still relate to my Marine brothers and sisters and the same thing with any other branch.

So it is, you, you definitely developed it. I think after being in it for so long, so. Do you feel like you were surprised by that change? Like, did you, did you ever anticipate that you would have gone through a transformation like that or any train? I mean, you went through obviously a lot of transformation through your service and did Did you anticipate that in any way? No, that's a good question.

I didn't anticipate it, but I went in open and I think that's what we asked students for. That's what we asked. The more open you are, the more receptive you are to things.

And that's when you have the ability to change your mind. So I just knew that the way that I was going about life, it wasn't the right way. And I was just anybody that could make me better.

I wanted to listen, you know? So I think coming in with that openness and that curiosity is what made me say, you know what? No, I get this, you know? And I was proud to, even though I was scared, you know, when 9-11 happened, if I had to go over and fight, I would have, I was excited to be a part of that, you know? So I think that's what it sort of created. And I think you just got to be open, you know, and that's what helped me. Absolutely.

What year is it that you enlisted? So I, August 25th, 1999. Yeah. Awesome.

So right before 9-11, that's, yeah, right there on the edge. 19 years old. Wow.

19 is also crazy. Yeah. That's really young.

He goes by fast. Yeah, absolutely. So once you enlisted, tell me, so you've enlisted, you've signed the papers.

Tell me what happens next. Where do we go from here? So I was, I knew college wasn't going to work out. I had a 1.8 GPA.

I had a 0.8 the second semester. So I'm like, man. And I was hoping that I was going to, I was at Methodist University.

I was going to transfer and go to NC State because I'm like, I'm a division one recruit. But the world humbled me. And I think sometimes God, the universe, whatever you want to call it, humbles you to let you know that you're not all that.

It's not really about you, but I want to get the best out of you so you can use that to be a servant to other people. So I felt like when I signed those papers, this was probably like, I want to say March, April of 99. And I was like, man, I can't go back to Wilson.

I don't want to stay up here in Fayetteville. I don't want to get in trouble. So my uncle, God bless his soul, he just passed away last year.

But he played a significant role in my life. I was like, look, Uncle Kent, I don't know what to do. I said, I don't want to go back home and I can't stay here.

Do you think I can go and stay with you? He said, yeah, you can go with me, boy. He said, but I'm going to put you on his truck. So at the time he was moving people and furniture.

And it's the hardest job I ever did in my life. But it was the most rewarding because he showed me that either you're going to work hard with your body or you're going to work hard with your mind. And then while we're going through that, I meet this guy in Wyoming, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

I'll never forget it because I ate a burger there and it messed up my stomach. He had this house that was just immaculate in the same way that your office have all these books. He had books all over his house.

He didn't have one TV in his house. But he had opulence. I'm talking like nice car, one of these amazing pianos.

And I was like, yo, did you? And he came in like Mr. Rogers, but he was like a smoother version. He had like some duckhead shorts and a sweater tied around his neck with some open-toed sandals. And I was just like, and he said, Hey, how are you doing young man? And he had his wand.

I never seen anybody like, and I love the way he speak. So I asked him, I said, did your degree get you to his house? And he said, well, of course not. But the knowledge I acquired and I was just like, I was fascinated by him because this is nobody that I would ever talk to the way that he conversed the words that he used.

And I was just so amazed with it. But it sparked my interest to say that a college degree can get you this. So when you couple that with going into the military, seeing these officers, they played a role in me deciding to go back to college to get my degree.

So I used that whole summer to work on a truck with him and it taught me hard work. It taught me work ethic. And then as soon as I think it was like July, late July, I went back home, stayed with my mom and dad for a little while.

And then I left to go to the military and that was, that was it. So I worked hard up until that point, but it taught me life, you know, but it also taught me the value of education. Absolutely.

So what was your experience in basic training? Like, where did you go for that? And how was it for you? Okay. So it was, uh, it was Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas. Uh, we was three 31st, uh, Wolfpack.

And what happened is it's funny because you're in the airport and you have all of these people, you come into the airport, you talking, you know, you man, basic training ain't gonna be nothing. And then as soon as you get down on this hall, you start seeing TIs and people are quiet. And I'm like, why are they quiet? Right? So we walk over there talking and they start yelling at us.

I'm like, Oh, I guess we're in it now. Right? So you try to sit with your friends because you come in from MEPS. We, all the people from Raleigh, North Carolina, we come in together and we're like, let's sit near each other, not knowing that it would help us get in the same squadron, but we all try to sit near each other.

So even when they kept trying to move us, we kept engineering jobs. So then you get on a van. And what happened is the van drives up to this place.

They take people that's in the front, they go off first. And then the ones in the back, they go to another squadron. So majority of us ended up in the same squadron.

So for North Carolina, and we would call it at that time, you had a little Wayne and all these, so we called ourselves the hot boys. You know, so, so we was, we was all the Wolfpack, but we was the hot boys. So it was going through basic training.

We had each other to lean on, you know, so it was times where I'd be tired, you know, and we'd be in the bathroom, he'd be like, take a nap. So I'd be in there asleep. And then they'd go.

So it was just good having it, but it was just a, it was a great experience. I actually encountered a guy that never seen a black person in person. Wow.

Yeah. Like never, he was from somewhere in Oregon and it was a little town where, and if you've ever been to Oregon, there are certain spots, especially at that time where you may not encounter a black person, but we was coming out of a shower. And this is at a time, you know, before all of this, you know, the world that we live in now, this is where people like, you know, it's funny.

Why are you looking at my body like this? So I get out of the shower and you're walking back to you and I'm naked. And I'm in this guy's like, hey, can I ask you a question? I'm like, what is this about? Like, you know, can I put some clothes on? And he keeps looking at the showers, but he's trying to talk to me. And I'm like, man, can I at least put on my underwear? So I put on my underwear.

He was like, look, can I ask you something? Have you, um, and I was like, what, what? He keeps looking at the showers. And I'm like, why is he looking at the showers? He said, have you ever pulled a 187? And I said, huh? And at the time Snoop had a song called 187 on undercover couch. So I'm like, I said, what are you saying? He said, have you ever pulled a drive-by? And if you could see him, like his eyes and the way he was breathing, he was serious.

And I said, um, man, look, can you keep a secret? And he was like, and I said, can you keep a secret? I said, look, all right, this is the truth, man. I said, I just saw myself on America's most wanted. I have four bodies.

And he said, I said, yeah, I killed four people. I said, so they w I was out there in Raleigh and they kept saying James Williams, James Williams. So I ran over there, grabbed the paperwork, you know, flew from Raleigh, North Carolina, all the way to San Antonio, Texas, made it here.

And I'm just trying to get to the border, man. If you say anything though, you're going to be the fifth body. Do you understand me? Right.

And like, he's like, and I was like, no, I said, I said, no, no. But why did you ask me? Why would you ask me that? This is the thing. And it changed the way that I ever looked at racism, prejudice, all of this stuff really changed everything.

He said, when I was younger, my mother would make me watch the Portland news. And she'd say, look at them. This is how they are.

And then she ran it. And you may be too young to know about this movie. There's a movie called juice with Tupac Shakur.

And he was very violent in that movie. And then it was another movie. If you've never seen it, the title would tell you everything you need to know called minutes to society within the first five minutes, two people get killed.

So what it hit me with was what if I would have fought him for when I got put out of the military or what if I would have cussed him out, I would have reinforced everything it was that he learned. Right. So what I realized is this is a learned behavior.

And the only way to combat it is to have empathy and have love gives people grace. If they're willing to be open to talk to you. So it taught me a lot, but it also, we build a nice little relationship.

So when he go to, when he went to his duty station, he's going to eventually become a senior airman staff sergeant, a tech sergeant. Now he may be willing to give other people

grace. So what I realized he taught me a lot in that moment, even though it was a very weird interaction, I really learned a lot from that.

So that was my, those are the highlights of basic training. The physical part was, it wasn't that, you know, I was coming from playing football, but it was mental. And, um, but those are the, those are the things that really impacted me.

Wow. I'm like speechless on that one. That is, that is awesome.

And you had told us, um, when you met with us on Friday, I just, I love to see that you're applying that to your life. You talked about your kids and how you are working to give them different experiences because I mean, we fear and we, and a lot of people hate what they don't know what they don't understand. And so, and so providing, I love to see that you're doing that in your own life.

I really commend you for that of, of giving them those experiences so that they, so they know, I think that that's awesome. But, um, after basic training, where were you staying? What was your job? What did you do? So I was, don't laugh. You know, I think I told y'all before I was, I was a dental hygienist.

So I cleaned teeth for four years. So my tech schools in Wichita Falls, Wichita Falls, Texas. So that's where all of the, the, um, the, uh, the medical students go.

And I need to go back because my wife would kill me. So I met my wife in basic training. I did run into her flight.

So I met her in basic training, but at the time I'm still in the mind of like, you know, she's a beautiful girl. I like her, you know, and I, I think this could be something to a degree, but I'm still a young man. And I'm like, look, I'm about to go to tech school.

I'm gonna use medical girls, all of this stuff. So we go to, um, Wichita Falls, Texas. And that's when I started learning, you know, maxillary, mandibular arch is your gingiva, not your gums.

So I really learned how to do the dental assisting side of things. Um, and then when I, of course, when I got to, uh, my duty station, you do that, you have your CDCs, which is called, I forgot what it's called, but you have to do these proficiencies to show that you are good at your job or, you know, your job. So tests that you have to do, but tech school is where I was seeing other women.

But when my wife got there and she was like, Hey, and actually I was talking to another girl and she tapped me on the back and I was like, Hey, you remember me? And I was like, Oh yeah. So we started talking and we started, uh, dating. And then we started dating in January of 2000.

And we got married February 8th of 2000. So we literally dated for a month and we've been together for 25 years. So, but it was, uh, it was just meant, I think the universe aligned all those things up, you know? And, um, yeah, so that's, that's what really stands out with tech school.

And I had orders to go to Holloman. She had orders to go to bill in California. So her orders, because I left first, her orders got, um, changed to go to Holloman.

So that's really stands out about it. But it was Wichita falls is sort of near Dallas, Texas. So that's, that's where it was at.

That's awesome. And then were you in the military on nine 11? Yeah. Tell me about that.

I'm really curious to hear about that. So it was, uh, yeah, that was a weird experience. So, cause everybody was standing around in a dental clinic.

I get to the dental clinic and people are just standing around and I'm like, what's going on? They were like a plane just hit the towers. And I'm just going to be honest at the time. I was just like, man, that's crazy.

Like how in the world the towers. So we're sitting around talking and I'm like, man, this is crazy. Nobody's doing anything.

And then all of a sudden you see another plane and you just like, wow. And instantly I didn't know how to respond to it. A lot of people didn't know how to respond to it.

So we're sitting there quiet. And, um, I think it was Gabe, Gabe Hernandez, Aaron Hernandez. He said, yo, we bought to go to war.

And I remember Sergeant Prosper coming in and Desmond Prosper. And he said, all world would never be the same. And at the time I'm 20, yeah, I'm 21 years old and I'm sitting here like, man, what does that mean? Like, that's the first thought that come to your mind.

Like, what does that mean? Like, what is it? What do we mean is never going to be the same because you're just thinking about unknown and all of these things that's happening. And I was scared, you know? Um, and it just was a very, it was, this was a very weird time and it was just all this speculation of what's going to happen. And it just, yeah, that was a very, uh, that, that impacted my life.

But it is sad because it was so unfortunate. And, um, but that helped prepare me for all of the other challenges that I dealt with in life where you like, well, it's the unknown, but we don't really know what it's going to be like. So, but, but at that time, 21 years old, it probably was like what COVID was for some of these students, even though it wasn't, you know, a war on our nation, that idea of what's happening and will the world ever be the same? And of course it would never be the same, but yeah, it changed everything.

I'm always really curious to like hear people's 9-11 experiences because I, and I do not say this to make the viewers nor anyone in the room feel old, but I am like, I'm the generation that wasn't there for that. I was born in 2003, so I was born two years, two years after the fact. And so I've only ever heard, but in that sense, it really, it fascinates me.

And one day my time will come, I'm going to have kids ask about the pandemic one day and I'm going to feel really old. So it will come back to me. Don't worry.

But, um, how did your, your service change after that? And if it did change, which I'm assuming it did, did it, did it happen quickly? Was it gradually? Did you see those changes over the years or was there like a one 80 we're doing something different? Yes. Overnight. So it was, it was a time where you can get anybody on base, no passes, no nothing.

It was so easy. Um, and even, you know, people may not talk about it. It was a time where you could bring food onto the plane.

People were smoking on the planes, right? Thank God they changed. Definitely. But people, it was a time where people could literally walk you up to the gate and sit with you, you know, before you leave now all of the security.

And I remember the first time I went to the airport and I'm going to go to the airport. Then I go back to the base. I saw people with, you know, their, um, AR, you know, just walking around and you're just like, yo, what is this? And this is not just even, um, international flights.

This was everywhere. And they're checking, they had the little mirrors going on in your car. So it changed everything.

So you take that and you, you go to a base. So getting on base now, they're going underneath your cars. They're checking you.

They're checking more ID. It was just, everything was very detailed. We're locked down.

So in order to get into certain facilities, you have to show your ID. It was just very, very, everything was by protocol and detail. It just changed overnight, you know? And it, of course it makes you a little uneasy.

And I think it creates this anxiety in people, you know, people reacting because they're nervous. They're afraid. They don't know what they got to do.

Even if you're walking around, like, I'm not afraid to go to war. Yeah. You may not be afraid, but the unknown still creates a little bit of anxiety.

Right. Um, cause I wasn't afraid in the sense of I could die, but knowing that you, and I know this may sound like oxymoron. I wasn't afraid of knowing that I could die.

Cause I know I'm going to die, but knowing that I could be putting myself in a situation to where it could come much sooner than I expected. And you don't know if you may be that person, you know, um, I think that it created, you know, all of that. I don't know if that's what it is.

No, absolutely. That's, I mean, that's exactly what I was getting at. I like, didn't even realize I knew that like the airport and I knew that I knew all of those changes, but I had never really even realized that you could get onto a military base before that.

Like that I was once quick intermission story. I did not get let onto McGee Tyson's base one time because I felt my wallet at home and I wasn't driving. And so I had to sit outside and call my mom cause I was, it was awkward.

Um, and I just didn't want people to think I was a weirdo standing out. I don't think they were very happy with me. It was crazy.

So what you just said there, if back in the days, if I had my ID and you was just in my car, I could just literally show my ID and everybody could get on base. They're not asking if you have weapons, none of that. So that changed everything, which is especially, I was with someone at the time who did have a military ID and even that they're like, we need to see your ID.

And I was like, I'm so sorry. This is really embarrassing, but I actually somehow forgot my entire wallet at home today. But yeah, that is, that is, that is an insane change.

Um, how long did you stay in the military after that? How long were you in total? Four years. So you do four years. And then when you get out, you're in active reserve.

So they could call you back at any time during that. But, um, it was, it was four years. Um, I really went in with a goal of graduating from college and then trying to play some pro football.

So it was, but outside of that, if I didn't know what I was going to do, I would have definitely stayed in. My wife wanted to stay in. She wanted to be a lifer, you know? So she followed me, but yeah, four years.

That's awesome. So when you got out of the military, you said that you were really heavily influenced. You, you want to go to school, you want to finish your education.

Um, what were your next steps? Did you know where you wanted to go or perhaps what you would want to study? Um, no, so I, I graduated, um, and the air force is real big on education. So I had two associates degrees before I got a associates, um, from the community college of the air force and, uh, associates and a dental assistant. And then I got an associates arts from New Mexico state.

And then I got my bachelor's management computer information system. So I thought I was going to go into computers and I was like, I just want to work at BB and T branch banking and trust. And I wanted to play pro football.

So when I got out jobs, didn't come that easy. And I literally spent the first six months, just training, training, uh, to try to make football teams. Then I had a tryout and I didn't run the 40, like I wanted to.

And by this time now I'm transitioning into the work life. So I'm at a temp job called liner pharmaceuticals where we made an approximate, and I worked from 10 to six at a night, but I'm still just like, I'm plugging along. I'm trying to make these teams going to different combines and all of this stuff.

And then I'm having knee surgeries at the same time. I'm like, God, how's this going to happen? And then by that time I eventually started working at BB and T and I thought I was going to like it, but I was like, I don't think I, I really liked this. This ain't what I really like.

And we was having financial issues. So I was like, well, I go back to school and work on my masters because I need a GI bill. And when I went in, I was just like, I'm going to take two or three classes, get another little bit of money and I'll be good from there.

But as we got into the coursework, I came in and these are lessons that I'm learning at a time I'm coming in and I have some Tim's on and I have a big necklace and I'm like, Oh, they don't want to, they don't want to talk to me. Right. Cause I'm at a time I'm a little younger, I'm younger than them.

And I think I'm 24. So, and this is at a military base. So you have a lot of working professionals that's there.

But then when we got into financial accounting, I'm asking, answering questions and things like this. So everybody want to be in my group. And I'm like, was it them or was it me? And I think it was me.

It was the energy I was putting off because then I started trying to sort of simulate a little bit more to the environment and be with them, had a greatest experience. And then once I got my masters I'm trying to get promoted at BB and T, but I'm like, I really don't like this. But at the same time, because I had all of these tryouts, Raleigh rebels came to Raleigh, North Carolina and said, Hey, we're trying to replace Carolina Cobras.

We're looking for talent and you've been invited to try out. So 77 people was invited to try out. But at the time NFL Europe had just folded.

So you got, I'm competing with these guys competing with people from the NFL, competing with people from CFL and all of these ACC players, NC state Duke, UNC. And I'm like, man, how am I make this team? I used to watch this guy on TV and something was like, look, you've been training hard for this. My brother used to hold me at the line and then I had to run out and run routes.

And when I went to the tryouts, I bought these gloves. It was like \$80. And I went out in the first two passes, I dropped them.

And I had just ran a four, four, seven and did the L drill and all of these things. So they're looking at me, I'm dropping these passes. I'm like, what is it? So I looked at the gloves and I was like, man, what is going on? And something in me says, God, me, whatever.

It said, do you believe in the gloves or do you believe in me? So I took the gloves off, threw them down. Next 11 passes, I caught every single one. And I felt good.

I didn't know if I was going to make it, but I felt good. I was like, I gave everything I could. And as I'm leaving out of the facility, Coach Gibson said, Hey, Williams, you're a local guy, right? I said, yeah, I'm from Wilson, North Carolina.

Just so happened, the owner owns a building, Parker's in Wilson, North Carolina. It's crazy how things happen. And it was like, well, we're giving out 25 contracts.

We want you to be on the practice squad. See if you can earn a team. Are you looking to sign with us? And I was like, let me talk to my agent.

I ain't have no agent. So I called my dad and I'm like, look, they want to sign me. So I'm just acting like you, my agent.

I'm like, okay, these are the... So I go back and I signed the contract and I ended up playing with them for two years and I only scored one touchdown, which was in the playoffs against the Canton legends. And then the very next play, I'm showing off and a kick return, not the very next, the next series and a kick return comes and I bump into the wall. I forgot, you know, there was a wall, so I'm falling down and all of this stuff.

But I say that to say that by playing football, something said to me, if you can do this with your body, what can you do with your mind? So that's what sparked me to go back to school to get my doctorate. So I got my doctorate in management organization leadership from university of Phoenix. But then the guy that was telling me to be a professor, he said, you still got to go back and get your PhD from a traditional brick and mortar.

So I'm like, man, I did all of this stuff and I still got to... So he set up, you know, me to have a conversation with Iowa state. And it was like, look, you have to come out here, non-degree seeking, take some courses. And I went out there spending money that I didn't have, but I just believed, you know, and at a time I was teaching and they said, either you could pursue your doctorate or you could pursue your teaching license.

But if you pursue your doctorate, you don't have a job. And I had nothing at that time, but I just believed. So went out to Iowa state, paid \$2,000 out of pocket we didn't have.

And I went out there and they gave me a scholarship. And then, you know, that was like, look, we found some more money. So it just ended up working out.

So that's kind of how my life got to where it is now. And I'm missing, I'm skipping over some jobs, but that's what happened. But football sparked my interest for saying, what can I do intellectually? Absolutely.

For sure. And then how did you end up at Tennessee? So Tennessee, I was at James Madison University before I came here. And I wrote a book called From Thug to Scholar.

And when I wrote that book, you know, not everybody was kind of happy with the way it was going, but I felt like when the year started, something was like, you're not going to be here that long. And I'm like, man, I'm making good money. Look at my house.

I'm looking at the mountains I can see. I'm like, no, I'm supposed to be here. And so I'm like, you won't be here long.

And within three, four months, me and the person that was running the department at the time, it was like, we just, we wasn't seeing eye to eye. So I resigned. And once I resigned, I was trying to apply for jobs up north.

I was like, I don't want to come south. And I keep saying University of Tennessee. And I'm like, man, I do not want to apply there.

Well, at the time I'm living in Harrisonburg, Virginia. So it was a medical commercial and it was University of Tennessee. And I was like, weird.

And then it was something else I saw at University of Tennessee. And then I said, if I see one more thing, I'll apply for the job. And then it was the Denver Broncos and it was Peyton Manning at the time.

And I was like, you know what? I applied. So I applied. And two days later, they contacted me.

And I'm just like, wow, this is crazy. And two weeks later, they have me coming out here. So I come out here, interview.

And by the time I'm driving home, which is, I think it's like maybe six hours to go from Knoxville to Harrisonburg, Virginia, they offered me the job. So it was just, it was just meant, you know? So, and when, when I came here, I was like, it just felt right. And, you know, so that's what brought me here.

That's awesome. I love, they say it's an everything school. They're not kidding.

That doesn't, that does not just apply to sports. Like UP has got, you just got a hand in like every field that you can imagine. Absolutely.

It's awesome. Yes. It's awesome.

So tell us a little bit about what you currently do at the university and like what your role here is. So my role here, I was tenured in 2020. So I'm teaching a lot of senior level classes, strategic planning, legal issues is probably my favorite class, but trying to help students take all of their knowledge, their comprehensive knowledge, turn it into a capstone.

So they're creating a feasibility study where we're trying to figure out what is the best way to go about the hotel that they're going to be creating near the culinary institute that used to be Visit Knox, well not Visit Knox, but it used to be our welcome center. So that's what the students are doing there. I do a lot of acting here.

So I do commercials with PetSmart. I've done some of these killer films, done some movies, some animations, but I also, I speak, you know, I write, like I was telling you, I got to speak to the chamber of tomorrow at their breakfast luncheon, but I speak internationally and throughout the U.S. teaching people how to use conflict as their superpower to create inclusive cultures. So that's pretty much what I'm doing in my life.

And some of that, I guess, sort of translate over to what I'm doing at Knoxville, but I just want students to become the best citizens, to be the best people. And I want them to take everything they're learning in the classroom and use it personally and professionally for the rest of their lives. So that's really what I'm trying to do.

Just trying to create better people, you know, and people that's looking for meaningful relationships and meaningful interactions. That's what I consider myself doing here. That's awesome.

That's so exciting. That's pretty much all that I have for you. I just want to provide space to where if there's anything that we haven't touched on that you feel like is an important part of your testimony or your story that you would like to share.

I just, you know, I think the only thing that I can share is whatever you believe in, I think you need to really hone in and focus on that. You know, I'm never going to tell anybody what to believe. I believe that something greater created me.

I call it God. And some of that is based on the way I was raised. But I truly believe the first thing that we was given is ourselves.

And if you're not taking care of yourselves and becoming the best version of yourself mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, you're not going to be able to impact people. So I just hope people that's listening to this figure out how much do you love yourself and use that to generate your purpose in life? Because if you don't have a purpose, you're just kind of aimlessly going through life. And it's a very self-destructive way to be.

And I know at a time where we talk a lot about mental health or mental well-being, I just hope people listen to this, take care of yourselves mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally. Absolutely. And then my very last thing, kind of going back to what I mentioned earlier and what you had talked about, about really putting yourself in a box.

That is something that I work with. I'm not a professional. I'm a student.

I don't know what I'm talking about. But that is something that I see a lot. I do a lot of Appalachian studies specifically.

And I think that that is one of the biggest challenges. I think that Appalachia has to overcome of people are put into boxes and it's hard for them to break out of that box. It's hard for them to escape that box because it's being perpetrated on them by people around them, but then also internally.

So kind of going back to how you had done that to yourself and how I had said that there are so many other people with a similar story to yours. If there are people with a similar story to yours watching, what advice would you give them about that and then how to break out of that box? That's a good question. And I love the way that you asked that because this transcends these social constructs we have, a white, black, male, female, all of that stuff.

Right? So I love what you're saying, because what I coined it in, in my first book from Doug DeScarla, an odyssey to unmask your true potential. A lot of us ended up wearing these masks and it's classical conditioning. You know, for me, when I said earlier in the story that it was kids, it was mafia, but it was really white kids based on what society calls it.

We all believe we was poor. None of us believe that we was smart enough to get a college degree. We didn't see it in our families.

Nobody ever graduated from college in my family. So we just did, we're going to go work at stop and shop. I think it was stop and shop or whatever the grocery store or go work at a plant, but nobody really had aspirations to go to UMass, to go to Boston college, et cetera.

And it's the same thing, you know, with kids in Appalachia, if people keep treating you like you're here and they're not raising your expectations, like the kid that may stand out in class academically because they have parents that was teaching them. It doesn't mean that kid is smarter. I know a lot of words and a lot of things that I didn't know when I was younger, but I read and I found a way to fall in love with reading.

I would challenge everybody. For one, knowledge is power. The more you read, you're going to become more aware, but you're also going to be better in mathematics.

You're going to be better in just feeling like you belong in spaces. So I would encourage everybody, read and find something that you love to read and use that energy to challenge you to read more challenging books. And I think once we create a society where everybody is educated, I feel like it will truly thrive.

I feel like it would eliminate or mitigate racism and stereotypes, but I just feel like it's a lack of awareness, a lack of knowledge. It's a big ignorance that we have in our society. And I think sometimes that people get a piece of paper, but to me, I don't really believe that they have learned anything.

It's a difference between transactional way of going about education or transformational. And I think by teaching individuals to read and to fall in love with knowledge, that's more transformational. And you don't even have a degree to really change the way you look at life.

Absolutely. Awesome. Well, thank you guys so much for watching.

Remember, don't ever place yourself in a box, your past, your circumstances, anything that is perpetrated on you. It doesn't define you. And there is always room for change.

Powerful example right here. If you want to hear more about Dr. Limitless and his story, look at his social medias. He has a TED talk, several books.

There's a lot, there's a lot there, and there's still a lot we can learn from him. So highly recommend doing that. Thank you guys so much.

Thank you.