

Episode 142: Traci's husband was arrested

This is Scott.

Here on the podcast, I talk to people who have been through extremely unusual situations. Like witnessing a murder, or being attacked by a monkey, or winning the showcase on The Price Is Right. We get to hear those stories first hand, from the person who experienced it.

In this bonus episode, I want to introduce you to another podcast that has a very similar format, which means you're gonna want to subscribe. This podcast is called The Only One in the Room, and the host is Laura Cathcart Robbins along with her boyfriend Scott Slaughter. I've known them for years. Truly wonderful people.

So today I'm bringing you a full episode of The Only One in the Room, and in the opening Laura will explain where that title came from. In this particular episode, you'll hear the guest, Traci, talking about her husband, Chris. Chris was arrested for a crime he didn't commit, and get this – he spent 3 years in jail just awaiting his trial. In the meantime, Traci is on the outside fighting to prove his innocence, while still maintaining an income and taking care of their 3 children, basically as a single parent. So much to talk about with a story like this.

And keep in mind, this happened back in the early part of the Covid pandemic. Hang around after the conversation, and I'll have an update about where the case is at today.

I just have to say, Laura is one of the most compassionate people I know. You'll hear it in this story, as she talks with Traci about what happened. And if you like this story, there are lots more that you'll love. Just go to whatever podcast app you're using right now, and search for The Only One in the Room and click Subscribe.

I'd love to hear what you think about this story, and I know it will definitely generate some discussion in the Facebook group, so let's hear your comments.

So please enjoy this conversation with Laura Cathcart Robbins from the Only One in the Room, talking with Traci, whose husband Christopher was arrested.

Christopher

This call is being recorded. When I was in the cell, it was short conversations because A) it was loud as hell, B) I was uncomfortable standing up next to people. I mean, they were literally on all the phones. I've found, in these past two weeks, we've had some of the best communication ever. Just looking at it like that, I feel closer to you. I feel more open. I feel that you can tell me things. It feels like there's a better understanding in our relationship. It feels good to be able to communicate with my wife.

Traci

I agree baby. I really, really do.

Christopher

There was no script to this. I'm floating around. I'm just in jail. I can be moved whenever they want to. What can I control? I have to remember (inaudible).

Traci

I'm the only one in the room that advocates for my innocent husband. Someone said to me the other day that they admired how much I fight for Chris, and I told them it helps to have someone worth fighting for - Christopher - from day one. Never looked at me or Asha as anything less than his priority. It is an honor to be able to give back to him the way he's always done for us.

Laura

This is Traci and Christopher's love story. They met, fell in love, got married, and created a thriving business and a beautiful family, one daughter and two sons. She was happier than she had ever been in her entire life and his only desire was to keep her that way.

Traci Kearney, mother, wife, owner, and operator of Doggie Goddess Daycare in Los Angeles, loved the life she had built with Christopher, and at 32 years old, still couldn't believe that she had found the man of her dreams.

But what happens when there is a terrible crime committed and it is your husband who is arrested and held for three long years while AWAITING trial? Do you work tirelessly to prove his innocence, raising money and awareness for his case with all the means at your disposal? Or would you decide that after three years, it is all too much and focus instead on raising your children as a single parent, and keeping your business going during a pandemic?

Hi, I'm Laura Cathcart Robbins, and this is The Only One In The Room. In September 2018, I found myself in an all too familiar position looking around the room at the other attendees at a famed writer's retreat. I realized that I was the only black woman in the room. When I wrote about my experience for the Huffington Post, something surprising happened. 24 hours after my piece went live, I had 568 direct messages in my inbox. These were messages from people of all races, ethnicities, creeds, and nationalities who had connected with my piece because they too had felt othered. These are the stories we want to share. This podcast is for anyone who has ever felt alone in a room full of people, which is to say that this podcast is for everyone.

You're listening to The Only One in the Room, presented by Lipstick and Vinyl, an executive lead produced by Christina Barsi. Make sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcast and be sure to like and leave us a review of your thoughts on the show. And if you have an Only One In The Room story you'd like to share, you can DM us on Instagram at @TheOnlyOneInTheRoom. Enjoy the show.

Laura

Traci Kearney, what was your first concert?

Traci

My first concert was by Immature.

Laura

Really? Tell me about it.

Traci

Yes. That was back in 1995, I think. A little boy band. It's every girl's dream to go see their favorite little boy band. Oh man, I'll never forget that.

Laura

How old were you?

Traci

I was 8, if I'm not mistaken.

Scott Slaughter

You were 8 at a concert?

Traci

Listen. Immature was it.

Scott Slaughter

That's so great.

Laura

I used to be an entertainment publicist and I had an office building over here in the valley where we live now, not far away, actually, from our house right now, but Immature's manager was in the office below me.

Traci

Oh, Chris Stokes?

Laura

Yes.

Traci

I still remember the details.

Laura

Yes, you do. They were always in our office.

Traci

That is crazy.

Laura

But I was a grown woman. I was 25-26, so I wasn't, like, losing my mind over them.

Scott Slaughter

I have to say, they weren't even on my— I still don't know who they were.

Laura

But people would come and wait for them to come out of the office in the parking lot and it was, like, crazy to get to my car sometimes.

Scott Slaughter

Tracy Kearney was probably standing up there to support them.

Laura

Yeah. Maybe, Tracy, were you one of those women?

Traci

Listen, I could have been if I had a way to get out of school.

Laura

He would've liked Immature and Reggae, who else would come? Man, I don't know. There were a few. Brandy. It was that era.

Traci

That era of music is amazing.

Laura

Yes. I love that. That's on my playlist right now.

Traci

Actually, all I listened to is the 90s and early 2000s. I can't really relate to a lot of new stuff. That's my era - all these pre-covid. All these throwback concerts, that's all me and my cousin have been doing. We've been going to all the throwback concerts because that's the kind of music that we enjoy.

Laura

Yes, they're so good. Alright, I am Laura Cathcart Robbins and this is The Only One In The Room, but I am never the only one in this room because, as usual, my boyfriend, producer, and co-host Scott Slaughter, who I call "hun" is here as well.

Scott Slaughter

Hi honey.

Laura

Hi hun. So, just to set the stage, we're recording this during the third week of peaceful protests following the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota police officer. In fact, so many people have been protesting that our hospitals are preparing for a second wave of Covid-19.

Scott Slaughter

Right. But in the midst of all that, there's a woman named Traci Kearney who's not only facing everything you and I are dealing with but also, add to that, the fact that her beloved husband, the father of her 3 children has been languishing in a LA County jail for nearly three years awaiting trial.

Laura

Three years...

Scott Slaughter

A long time.

Laura

So Traci and her husband Christopher have owned and operated— is it Doggy Goddess Daycare, Traci?

Traci

That is correct.

Laura

Okay, good. For years. How long? Since 20—?

Traci

That was 2008.

Laura

2008. So 12 years. Since Christopher's incarceration, Traci is running the business on her own, advocating for her husband's release, and raising their teenage daughter and two young, beautiful sons. Your sons are ridiculous.

Scott Slaughter

Your whole family.

Laura

Yeah, her whole family. Of course, your daughter could be your sister, so that's a whole other thing. Traci and Christopher have an absolutely incredible love story and we're so happy you were here to share it with us. We wanted you on this podcast to talk about this love that is against all odds. So welcome, Traci.

Scott Slaughter

Yeah, welcome, Traci.

Traci

Thank you, both of you. I appreciate it.

Laura

And Traci, you might be one of the people that I'm closest to that I've never met.

Traci

I love our conversations. You are such a gem.

Laura

Yeah. We have so many great conversations. I'll call you thinking that it's going to be like a couple of minutes and then I'll look up an hour and a half later and I'm like, "Oh, snap."

Scott Slaughter

Yeah, she'll come to me and be like, "I was just talking to Traci." I'm like, "Traci? Traci who?"

Laura

Traci again.

Scott Slaughter

Traci Kearney? Oh, again.

Laura

I do have a lot of Traci's in my life. I usually call them by their last name because there are 5 or 6 that are close to me. But yeah, I've so enjoyed having you in my life. And a shout-out to Michelle Ross, right?

Traci

Yes.

Laura

Who put us together through my friend, Christina Simos. I'm so grateful for that connection because it brought you into my life. And, hopefully, I'll get to be a witness when you bring Christopher home.

Traci

Oh, I wouldn't have it any other way. You are kind of stuck with me. So just get ready for it.

Laura

So tell us how you and Christopher met.

Traci

Oh, I love telling this story. Christopher and I met— we both worked together at 24 Hour Fitness here in Los Angeles off of Slauson. 24 Hour Fitness was my second job. I had worked at another doggy daycare prior to starting my own. I was a single mother with our teenager and I needed more of an income, so I applied for 24 Hour Fitness for part-time reception. I got the job and it was kind of just a really cool environment. All of us that worked there were young and Christopher was in sales. We all had a mutual respect for each other. Christopher and I kind of got closer because he had this smile that literally would light up the whole front office and we would joke around and play around, but nothing serious. I was trying to be professional.

One day, I got some McDonald's and I was eating at the front desk of the gym while doing check-ins because my boss told me I could. She said, "You can eat your food at the front." Christopher came over and helped himself to a handful of my french fries. I don't like to share.

Laura

Neither do I.

Traci

Not my McDonald's fries. That's going against the rules. So I said, "Excuse me, did you just take some of my fries?" And he gave me that smile while chewing my fries, and that's kind of when it sparked.

Laura

Yeah, I can see that.

Traci

I'm literally envisioning it right now. I'm playing it back in my head. So, not long after that, I would sit at his desk on my break and we would just talk. I stopped working there about 3 months after because 2 jobs were really hard with a young child. So, we didn't see each other for about a month or so. Then, I went back to that gym with my mom to work out and Christopher literally chased my mom's car down. He knew my mom's car and he ran down the driveway. We were about to go out with our little validation ticket and he banged on the window

and scared the crap out of both of us. I rolled down the window and I said, "Hi." He said "Hi" back. My mom was, like, "Who is this?" And I told her. He looked at me and went, "I would really like for you to call me sometimes. It's been a while since I've seen you." Long and behold, that was 2007. We literally kind of just jumped into the relationship. There was no hesitation from either one of us. It was something we both really wanted.

Laura

Wow. There are so many things that are right with that story - from you not sharing your french fries to him taking them anyway and smiling at you as he ate them.

Traci

Yes.

Laura

And then just the friendship that you guys had as a foundation.

Traci

Yes.

Laura

And everything that you post on Instagram, every story you've told me is full of the fun that you guys had together - your Disneyland posts. If you follow Traci - and I hope you do after you listen to this podcast so you can support her, her journey, and the effort to bring Christopher home. You'll see a love story. It's a slideshow of a love story. It's not just romantic love. It's the love for their family. It's the love for their children. But you will not walk away with any impression other than then this is a couple madly in love with each other.

Traci

Thank you for saying that.

Laura

It's true.

Traci

It's exactly the story that I want people to know. I want you to get to know Christopher for the man that not only I fell in love with but, also our teenager who is almost 17, at the age of 3, fell in love with him just as much as I did.

Laura

Wow. Tell me the ages of your sons.

Traci

They are 3 and 6.

Laura

And Christopher has been waiting for trial for almost 3 years in jail.

Traci

There it is - so many days now.

Laura

Yeah. So he has spent very little time then with your youngest?

Traci

Correct.

Laura

Oh man. Alright, so let's go to Christopher's arrest. Can you tell me what happened there?

Traci

Oh yes. So working the doggy daycare, Christopher worked more hours than I did because he wanted me home with the kids. So, it was about 9:30 PM when he would usually get home after closing. I was working out in the living room and I heard through my headphones something that literally sounded like someone ran into the house. I remember getting off of my bike and I just saw the red and blue lights kind of flashing from all the windows. When I opened my door - it was night time - I remember a minimum of 15 guns pointing at me and they were screaming, "GET OUT! COME OUT! PUT YOUR HANDS UP!" Just everyone's screaming at the same time. I just remember having my hands up and screaming, "What's going on?" and listening to them. But my daughter was right behind me because she was in the living room with me watching the boys while I worked out. I just remember turning around to her and saying, "Call my mom" because my mom lived not even three blocks away at the time.

I was coming out with my hands up and freaking out. They took me and they're gentle with me. They put me in handcuffs and they're trying to calm me down, which is virtually impossible. I was screaming, "My kids are in the house. What is happening?" They never told me why they were there right away, so I was literally panicking. They put me in this holding van and I was just screaming for my kids, like, "I want my kids." They're like, "We're going to bring your kids. Calm down." Then, they asked where my husband was and I said, "He's in the shower. He just got home from work." And I instantly think of what we all have come to witness. I was like, "Please don't hurt him. Please don't hurt him." So they brought my kids to me in the van. The windows were tinted in the van and I was trying to see when they brought my husband out.

All the guns, again, are facing the house and my husband comes out with his hands up. He was in his underwear. They handcuffed him and brought him into the same van that we were all in. The kids, the boys were clueless about what was happening. My daughter looked traumatized sitting in there with us. I can't calm down to save my life. To make a long story short, they took him away. Not long after that, they asked us thousands of questions. They destroyed our house looking for evidence that they never found and it was just a nightmare. It really was.

Laura

Oh my goodness. So they took him away in a separate vehicle and left you? Or they took him away in the van and left you guys at the house?

Traci

No, they took him away in a separate vehicle. They took him out of the van and that was the last time we physically were next to each other.

Laura

Did they let him put clothes on before they took him?

Traci

At first, they didn't. I don't know what he said to convince them, otherwise, but they put some pants on him. He was still handcuffed. And they halfway put some pants onto my son when he came out of the house, but he did not have on his shirt.

Laura

Obviously, you have no idea why this happened, right?

Traci

I have no idea what happened. By midnight, I finally got some news. They couldn't tell me anything until the detectives got there. Now, mind you, they came all the way from Pomona. So they sent Pomona PD and Pomona SWAT. SWAT first pulled the gate off of our house - that's the part I forgot to mention. We have a big security gate - like a steel gate - so that, when we're transporting the dogs, they can safely come from the garage into the house and vice versa. I've put photos on my Instagram. They pulled their Hummer onto our front lawn, I guess hooked it onto our gate and yanked it off of the foundation of our house. No announcement. No "We're here. Come out if you're in the house." Nothing. By midnight, when the detective finally came three hours in, then I found out. He said, "Your husband is being taken on suspicion of murder." And I said, "You guys do all this for suspicion?! First of all, you have the wrong person. But suspicion?!"

Laura

And for people that are listening, can you just tell us the distance between Pomona and where you are, like, time-wise?

Traci

Minimum of a 45-minute to an hour drive.

Laura

Right. Okay. So what do they charge him with?

Traci

He was charged with first-degree murder and gang affiliation, which I was told is a standard charge and that they will try to add for more time. So they definitely didn't hesitate to add that on there.

Laura

Yeah. When we interviewed Judge Craig J. Mitchell, who I think I sent you his episode, but he talked about that with disdain about how those charges would be added for exactly that. Tell me how do you know that Christopher is innocent?

Traci

My husband works insane hours with me. He's all about us. As you've seen on social media, my husband can't even— we don't even do, like, "Wait until December 25th to open Christmas gifts." He can't hold water. He just goes, "Here are your gifts. I can't. Open it now. Open it now." So Christopher can't keep anything from me. He'll look at me sideways when he finds out I said this word. He is very sensitive and he takes things to heart. He's a big teddy bear. When I say he literally can't keep anything from me, he can't. I'll always know when something's up. He can't surprise me because I always know.

Laura

Yeah. I love that.

Traci

Yes. So if I hurt his feelings, he'll say he's okay, but he is not. I know if I said something that may have rubbed him the wrong way and we'll talk about it. But he can't say, "I didn't do anything or nothing's wrong," and me being like, "Okay."

Laura

Right. So you're speaking to his character - that's how you know he is innocent. But logistically, how do you know he's innocent?

Traci

My husband would never take a life. The facts of the case stated it - even though I knew way beforehand - that my husband was innocent. The case itself— nothing points to my husband as the person that did this hideous crime.

Laura

Right. I mean, I've actually read over different documents on this case and I have to completely agree with you. It seems like I kept looking for something that I might have missed because I don't get it. I don't understand how that could have been the conclusion that was drawn and that it was Christopher, but now the worst has happened. He's been brought in on murder charges and you're left with your three children. Now, you're essentially a single parent for the next— you're not thinking this is going to be three years, obviously. You're thinking, "I'm going to get my husband out of jail." Right?

Traci

I thought he'd be home by whatever the court date was going to be. Instantly, I was like, "They're going to realize right away that they got the wrong person. They're going to have to let him go."

Laura

So what happened next?

Traci

That did not happen. He had his arraignment date and the attorney that we had at the time, without hesitation, told me that this would not be under a year, that this specific police department does not back down and, even if they are wrong, they're not going to admit they're wrong. They're going to write it out in hopes that they can just get a conviction. That's exactly what we've been dealing with.

Laura

So how does one go about raising the money for a criminal attorney? Kind of on a dime, right? Because you didn't have much time.

Traci

No, I didn't. So the blessing of having our clients that are like family is that our top clients reached out in support and offered to advance their dog's daycare and boarding services. That was such a blessing because the first lawyer was 3 times less than the legal team that we have now. So we raised that money within a month and paid the first attorney. That was only through

the preliminary stage. We were sure that, at the preliminary hearing, there was not enough evidence to hold Christopher over for trial.

Laura

Right. Is there any evidence?

Traci

No. Their evidence is someone that apparently fingered Chris— he didn't even really finger him. He said, "I see you all got your man" when Chris was brought into the jail because he was also in jail. But at the preliminary, he retracted all of his statements. He said he was high on a drug - I think it was PCP - and he said he never said this and he never said that. We were hearing this at the prelim and I was thinking, "My husband's about to walk out of this courtroom." But they can literally use what he said during his police interviews in the interrogation room and that is enough to hold someone over for trial.

Laura

Wow. But there's no physical evidence connecting him, right?

Traci

No evidence.

Laura

No gun, no—

Traci

No weapon. No DNA. Yeah. They took his truck the night that they took him and destroyed it, for the most part. I have it back in my possession now. I had to basically piece it back together, but they never found any gunpowder or gun residue or whatever they were looking for. The witness that was with the man was deceased now. Their descriptions were nothing of the likes of Christopher.

Laura

What were their descriptions?

Traci

Light skinned and fat. And my husband is dark. Very dark.

Laura

Yes, he is. Yes.

Traci

And he is not fat. When they showed one of the witnesses a still photo of my husband, she said, "That's not him."

Laura

Wow. So that seems like pretty convincing evidence to, at least, look for other people on this, right?

Traci

Yes. The person was shown multiple photos of potential gang members of said gang that they're trying to say my husband is from. My husband's photo was a still photo from a gas station earlier that day. The mugshots that they showed her the lineup were of gang members of the gang, so she actually ended up identifying someone in that lineup with confidence. It's actually in the police reports that said, "She started sobbing uncontrollably while she circled his photo." Instead of taking her word for it, they said, "That's impossible." This is after 3 separate times they brought her in. By the third time, they told her, "You identified the wrong person. It wasn't him." They told her what she saw.

Laura

And they went with Christopher...

Traci

Right. Bless her heart for never giving in. She stuck with her story that my husband— she said he's too dark and he's not fat enough.

Laura

Did they call her as a witness? Did your attorney call her at the trial?

Traci

Yes. She went up for the prelim and the trial and I'm so grateful that she never changed her story.

Laura

Yeah, that's amazing. So, you went past the prelim and you're in the trial phase. You have an attorney that maybe could be described as overwhelmed at this point - do you think so?

Traci

Very overwhelmed. I think he underestimated what this courthouse was capable of. Like, so many of us that knew Chris or read the facts of the case. There was no way they were going to win this. So I think he went in there thinking, "Well, they don't have enough, and the facts would be enough to set Chris free." So there was no plan B. They definitely opened everyone's eyes to what they can say, the way they can manipulate the jury's minds to think this way, and basically steer away from the facts. Let me make up a story. Let me put you in this fairytale land. Let me get all of your emotions involved. But that's not bringing the family justice. You can't bring the family justice just by getting someone. You need to make sure it's the right person.

Laura

Yeah. So tell me, how are you keeping up his spirits then? How are you keeping up your spirits?

Traci

Oh, I work out almost every single day, multiple times a day. After Chris was taken away, I was instantly depressed. I have blackout curtains - we always have - so we can sleep. I kept them closed. My mom gave up her place and moved in right away to help. So I would just go to work. I had to keep the business going. But when I came home, I didn't have anything left. I didn't have anything left for our kids. I didn't have anything left for me. I just got in bed for almost a week straight, probably longer. Then, my mom came in one day and said, "Traci, you got to get up." She just looked so serious and she's like, "I'm so concerned. Get back to working out. You

loved working out” because I have fun with my workouts. So, that's what I dug deep into to clear my mind. So, that's been my saving grace.

Then, with Christopher, we read our couple's devotional Bible every day. We're up to three different ones now. Sometimes he'll read, sometimes I'll read, or sometimes we'll both read and there are questions at the end of each reading, which helps us bounce off of each other with remembering wins and memories and how far we've come when things were hard and look at how we overcame that. Every marriage has its ups and downs, so it's really nice when we're able to reflect on things that we may have whined and bickered about in the past and, I promise you, today, it wouldn't even phase us.

Laura

That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. How long do you get to talk to him when you speak with him?

Traci

Lately, it's been anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour if he can use the phone on a consistent basis. He just got moved back down to Wayside which is an hour outside of Los Angeles. So the only plus that he's able to focus on being so far away is that he can use the phones more. Downtown LA is way more overcrowded. There are at least 40 to 50 of them in one dorm sharing 3 or 4 phones. I wasn't able to talk to him for long periods of time when he was in LA.

Laura

The trial that we're talking about ended in a mistrial, right?

Traci

Yes.

Laura

There was one juror.

Traci

There was one juror. So the trial was over. We were kind of relieved. Everyone else that was there believed that we did it because the facts weren't enough. We weren't impressed with Chris's lawyer's performance, but we had to keep the faith that the facts were enough. We heard the jury rules out beyond a reasonable doubt. We alone can come up with 10 off the top of our heads of different things that you have to find him not guilty because they did not prove this, that, or that. So when they called our lawyer and said, “It's 11 to 1,” we instantly got excited. We went one floor down so that we wouldn't be on the same floor as everyone else. We thought, for sure, it was 11 to 1 in favor of not guilty. I'm pretty sure I gasped out loud. Then, I started crying when I heard it the other way when we got back in that courtroom.

Laura

Right. Why do you think it was 11-to-1 in favor of his guilt?

Traci

The way the DA put on that case was exactly like what I said earlier. Forget about facts. I'm going to show you the deceased family's victim 30 times. I'm going to make you stare at this deceased body. I'm going to zoom in on this deceased body and I'm going to make up a motive as to why you need to convict Christopher Kearney and bring this family justice. It's basically

what he said. He said, "I'm going to give you a motive. I don't have to, but I'm going to give you one."

Laura

Wow. Wow. So you were powerless at that point.

Traci

So powerless.

Laura

Yeah. So then the trial ended and he stayed incarcerated.

Traci

That is correct. Oh, Laura. Walking out of that courtroom without Christopher— we really thought it was over. I had therapists lined up for him. We had started talking about this, weeks before. He wanted to get into therapy because of some of the things he's seen and witnessed there. I had therapists lined up. I bought new pillows. I bought new blankets. I bought him new underwear and socks, and it was all ready for him. Coming back home without him in the car, coming back home with everything ready for him that day was extremely hard.

Laura

Oh, I can't even imagine. When was that?

Traci

That was September. 18th,

Laura

September 18th, 2019?

Traci

Yes.

Laura

Okay. So then comes your campaign to get Shaun King's attention. Is that correct?

Traci

Yes. Yeah. So I started the day after. Well, when the trial ended, Michelle was with me. We rode together. We rode all the way back to LA in silence. I couldn't give her anything and she couldn't give me anything. We were just absolutely destroyed. I took her back to her car and then I went home. My mom had to work. She's a nurse. And my cousin, who's more like a sister, also had to work. She left work early. They both did and met at my house, and I just lost it. I lost it in tears. I just kept saying, "I don't know how I'm going to do this again, raising the money. I don't even know where to begin." I just was kind of just letting it all out. Then, at the end of crying for about an hour, I said, "I have to tell Chris's story."

I just kept playing back the way the DA was making Chris look like this monster. Because we didn't have a proper defense, the jury never got to know Chris. They didn't know anything about him. So I started posting photos of Chris and started telling our story. I had been following Shaun for years before I even could fathom the thought of needing him for myself.

Laura

Sorry just to interrupt really quickly. Shaun King is an American writer. He's a civil rights activist and he's co-founder of Real Justice PAC, and he uses social media to promote social justice causes including Black Lives Matter. So go ahead.

Traci

Yes. Yes. So when I was trying to think about ways to raise money, I thought of Shaun and I said, "It would be something to have him advocating for Christopher if I can just get him to look at this case." I know that I could convince him to help us, but we all know that, for those that know Shaun King, that is hard to do, right? He has a lot of followers and everybody is begging him for help. So I just started one day by posting a different photo almost every day or a video clip, and I would tag Shaun and I would tag Lee Merritt because I was also following him. And then, I just started posting to every blog, every celebrity you could think of just this long thing that was saved on my little clipboard on my phone. I would just copy-paste, copy-paste until Instagram thought I was a spammer and they would put me in timeout for 24 hours. Before I knew it, everyone started tagging Shaun.

The wonderful Leslie Jones— she's a comedian. I'm happy to call her a friend.

Laura

She's amazing.

Traci

She shared my story. Oh, I love her. She shared our story on her social media platform. She was the first one to do it. She reached out to me and she was so heartbroken, and she asked me to send her a picture and she would share our story, and she did. And people went crazy with tagging Shaun. Three months later, you'll love this story. Christopher had asked me to bring the boys to see him. He was at Wayside again. They just keep moving him back and forth between Valencia, California or Castaic - one city over - to LA. So he said, "Why don't you bring the boys to see me on Saturday?" I always went every weekend. Then he said, "Asha, our teenager, take her and her best friend to Six Flags because it's one exit over and they have season passes. That kills two birds with one stone." I was like, "Okay, that's perfect. We'll do that." The day before on a Friday, they canceled our visit - no explanation - and I couldn't reschedule it. So I kept the promise to Asha and her friend and I drove down there to drop them off at Six Flags, and I just started crying after I dropped them off. I had my boys and I'm like, "We're supposed to be going right there to go see Chris and we can't."

So I got back in the car and had to walk them in to get their little flash pass so they didn't have to wait in line. I was walking back to the car and I got an alert. I got in the car and I looked at it and it was a DM. It was a DM from Shaun King.

Laura

What...

Traci

I got into the car and he said, "Hey my friend, I just saw your story. Basically, give me more information. Email me more information." I sat in that car and I just lost it. Yeah, I lost it. I did not leave that parking lot until I sent him almost every document that I could attach to Google Drive and I sent it all over, and then I hit the road and I just had this weight lifted off my shoulders the

whole way back. Like, something's going to happen now. Like it worked. It really worked. Three months of tagging and everyone tagging him worked.

Laura

Yes. Well, it's really because you had gone— like you said, your community showed up for you for the first trial and gave you money and you were able to raise the money through that - through your beautiful community. But then, you can't go back to those same sources over and over again and you had spent all the money in the first trial, right?

Traci

Yes. Between attorneys and the experts. For the experts, we ended up paying out of pocket.

Laura

Yes. So now, in order to get the type of attorney that can win this case, you needed to level up.

Traci

Oh, yes. Yes. We needed to level up.

Laura

So Shaun King went to bat for you and posted about Christopher on his social media?

Traci

Yes. And I want everyone to know that did not happen overnight. That man makes sure that he knows what he's talking about. In our very first phone conversation - unlike attorneys and people that don't try to humanize the person - he wanted to know what you asked me. How did you guys meet? He wanted to know about Chris first. So it was fun telling him the backstory of how Christopher and I met as well. He took about two months to speak to his legal experts, to speak to potential lawyers that we were interested in, and he made sure that everything was done right before he put it out there on social media.

Laura

Amazing. That's absolutely incredible. So then the money was raised for his current legal team. Right?

Traci

Yes.

Laura

And you've raised the money for this new legal team that you've been connected to through Shaun King, right?

Traci

So I was referred to this specific attorney from— Jason Flom is actually a founding board member of the Innocence Project. Now, the Innocence Project was referred to me 10 times over as well, but they deal with post-conviction, not pre-conviction. So, Jason also found out about Chris's story and wanted to help. He reached out to his amazing legal friends, and one of his legal friends referred me to the legal team that we have now. It was a no-brainer. Once I spoke to them, that was the choice that we needed to make and I'm so glad we did.

Laura

Right about the time that you have this new legal team in place, COVID is setting in on our nation. I think right away, right?

Traci

Oh yes. You are right.

Laura

You were limited.

Traci

Yeah. Right away.

Laura

So you couldn't go see him.

Traci

No, I haven't seen Chris since the end of February. His legal team was sworn in on April 2. That was the one and only time that they have been able to see each other. That was at court when they were sworn in and then Covid changed everything. They haven't been able to have one meeting since everything happened.

Laura

That's incredible. So really, your phone calls with Christopher are the gold right now, right?

Traci

They are his lifeline. Yes, they are.

Laura

So speaking of Covid-19, the jails are locked down. All jails, all prisons are locked down. No visitors in or out, including attorneys, right?

Traci

Including attorneys.

Laura

So were you scared when you heard about Covid in the jails for the first time?

Traci

Initially, I wasn't. I was scared for everyone because anyone can get it. But I strongly believed - I made myself believe - that my husband was not going to get it. I really believed in that.

Laura

And I'm sure that carried you through a few days and weeks, like, "I don't have to worry about that. "

Traci

As long as he called. I anxiously waited to hear how he sounded. Did he sound normal? Did he sound upbeat? It was going good.

Laura

It was going good. And then one day, what did you hear in his voice?

Traci

He sounded so done, just exhausted, and couldn't say more than three words without stopping. He wouldn't accept it. He said he didn't think he had it. He just didn't want to believe he had it. I asked him, "Well, tell me some things that you're feeling." And he said, "My chest hurts. My body is sore." He had a cough, but he was trying to say the cough wasn't a lot, it was just a little bit here and there. He was trying to play it down. He did not want me to worry. He was like, "I'm just really tired." I went, "Christopher, that's all signs." I was more concerned around that timeframe because, originally, no one can go in or out of any of the dorms. If you're there, that's where you're going to stay. Then, for some reason, they started letting, like, people being switched. Chris and I are convinced that when they did that, someone brought it in because almost everyone in that dorm tested positive.

Laura

And the dorm is about how many people?

Traci

It could be anywhere from 30-40, if I'm not mistaken.

Laura

And it's an open-plan?

Traci

It's an open-plan and they have triple-tier bunks. Everyone has a bunk number where they sleep.

Laura

And this is Christopher's preferred place?

Traci

Yes. He was in a school dorm, which is a privilege - as highly privileged as you can get in jail. Before Covid, they went to school. So they had three classes a day, various subjects, whether it was computers or parenting. They just had different subjects and he really enjoyed that. It really took some of the time off because he was in class half of his day, so he really enjoyed that. It was a privilege for him to be in that program.

Laura

During one of our conversations, you were talking about his relationship and your relationship with the guards there. Can you talk about that a little?

Traci

Absolutely. So we actually were just talking about this when he called yesterday. He is very respectful of anyone. He would ask the officers, "How are you doing today? How was your day?" or "Thank you." It's something as simple as a thank you. Of course, I was there faithfully every weekend. The visiting staff is usually very repetitive - it's the same people - so they got to know Christopher and I's love story. They loved the kids. When Christopher was transferred back from Wayside to LA again, all of them who knew us were so devastated. They thought Christopher had been released because they hadn't seen him anymore. They didn't know what

had happened. They didn't know that he got transferred out because they're in the front in the visiting roles. They're not in the main part of the jail as much.

So they saw me first and the look on their face— they were just so puzzled. Then, I told them and they were just like, “Oh no.” So, when they could, they would allow us to have what's called “a row”, which is extended visits. Usually, for the inmates that are on a 23-hour day lockdown, they get an hour visit versus 30 minutes and we were always so grateful, especially when I had the kids. They would let us do the hour visits so that we could spend some extra time together. They always looked out for us any way that they could. They humanized Chris. It goes back to being humanized. Christopher was not a number. A lot of the inmates are not. That staff— I'll give them the benefit of the doubt. They are really nice.

Laura

Wow. Well, it sounds like they were able to see who you guys were and honor that, which is so beautiful. I didn't know that they don't know when prisoners get transferred out or they're released, so I can see their dismay when you come back in. So tell me where we are now. Christopher has another court date set?

Traci

Yeah, so the next court date is going to be on June 29th. Unfortunately, because of Covid, nothing's going to happen at that court date either. The only plus to the shutdown of all these trials that were already pre-set and now have to be rescheduled is that his legal team has had so much time to get caught up on the case because they don't have to be in court every morning for their clients. So they've gotten a lot of background work done, which is a blessing. The only thing they really need to do now is put it all together and sit with Christopher. So, the next court date is going to be on June 29th. Christopher won't need to go to that one. I think they're just going to do another continuance until everything kind of gets back to normal because they're not even doing trials right now.

Laura

Wow. Oh, Traci. I just have to say that that's an incredible story you just told us. We're in the middle of it. I know it's not over or maybe we're at the tail end of it, hopefully.

Traci

I'd say the light is right there. I can see it.

Laura

Yeah, the light is right there. Thank you. Your spirit and your energy is incredible. It's incredible. It is absolutely from a larger source. Whatever you've done to let that source in, keep doing it please because you buoy all of us and give all of us hope.

Traci

Someone said to me the other day that they admired how much I fight for Chris, and I told them it helps to have someone worth fighting for Christopher. From day one, I never looked at myself or Asha as anything less than his priority.

I'll share a story with you that I shared with Shaun when he was asking me different questions about Chris. We had been dating for four months. So we started dating and made it official in September of 2007. Tax time came around, of course, in January or February-ish. Christopher got his income tax return and he asked me to come up to the job at 24 Hour Fitness. He was

still working there and he said to me, "Here," and he gave me— it was easily over a thousand dollars. And he said, "I want you to go to the mall," because I was still a single mother, kind of, for the most part. "I want you to get you and Asha some new clothes. Just give me a pair of jeans or two if you see something you think I'll like." This is not even four months into our relationship. I was like, "Is he serious right now? I'm what? 23? Did he just say that?" And that is something that always stuck with me.

Christopher never ever put himself before Asha and I, ever. Although I wish the circumstances were different, I told Chris it is an honor to be able to give back to him the way he's always done for us. He always thought I was going to leave and things that he heard in that jail. It's nice now. He went from that back in 2018 to he knows that his wife is not going anywhere. His wife is fighting. I'm not going anywhere.

Laura

You're not going anywhere. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you letting us get to know Christopher through this conversation right now. I mean, I feel like I know him so well. I've never met you except over the phone. I've never met him over the phone, but I still feel like I know his character. I understand him to be innocent of this. I feel like you're in very good hands with your new attorneys who I also had the pleasure of speaking with, and I am confident as you are that this will be resolved. I just hope that there's enough resolution with Covid that you're able to get to the point where you can get him in front of a judge and a jury and get him out of there.

Traci

That's what I'm hoping for too. I'm grateful, like I said, for the timing that the lawyers can sit down and get their background work done on it. I'm also grateful for the Wrongful Conviction Podcast and, of course, the Netflix documentary that has recently been trending on Netflix from the wrongful conviction crew called The Innocence Files. I feel like people are paying attention. And when you do get picked for jury duty, you actually do just that - pay attention. Don't just go off of your emotions and just want to put somebody away. Pay attention. Everybody that is incarcerated is not guilty.

Laura

Thank you, Traci. I'm hoping that we can continue these conversations and follow you until Christopher is home with you, and then maybe even a little bit afterward.

Traci

I would love that.

Laura

I would love that too. So thank you.

Scott Slaughter

Yeah. Thank you, Traci. And please tell Christopher we said hey.

Traci

I will. He already knows of you, Laura.

Laura

He does?

Traci

Oh, yes. I thought you're stuck with us.

Laura

Yes, we are. Well, soon we're going to be bringing Venus and Serena to you.

Scott Slaughter

Oh, yeah. Oh God, we need you.

Traci

Yes. Yes.

Laura

Venus and Serena are our dogs, of course - not the athletes. Okay. Thank you, girl.

Brenden

Good morning, daddy.

Christopher

Good morning, Brenden, my big strong boy. Show me your muscles. Go "Urghhhh".

Brenden

Urghhhh.

Christopher

You're so strong. Say "I'm strong."

Brenden

I'm strong.

Christopher

Yeah. URGHHH.

Brenden

URGHHH.

Christopher

I love you, big guy.

Brenden

I love you too.

Christopher

Did you say your prayers this morning?

Brenden

Yes.

Christopher

You did?

Brenden

Yeah.

Christopher

Are you sure?

Brenden

Yeah.

Christopher

Did mommy tell you to say them or you said them on your own?

Brenden

Yeah.

Christopher

You said them on your own?

Brenden

Yeah.

Christopher

Can you say for daddy one more time?

Brenden

Yeah.

Christopher

Thank you. I appreciate it. You're so smart.

Brenden

(Prayer)

Christopher

Aw. I love you, Brenden. You're so smart.

Brenden

I love you too.

Scott 55.51

Since that episode with Traci went live, there has been a major development in Christopher's case.

Just last month, May of 2023, Traci made a video of this announcement and linked to it from her Instagram. Her Instagram name is “justiceforchristopherkearney” and it’s also linked in the show notes.

Unfortunately, the news is not good.

In the video, Traci said that she was surprised to be told that Christopher has decided to avoid having a second trial. Instead, he made the decision to accept a plea offer from the prosecutor, and the terms of that deal mean that he will have to serve another 8 years.

In the video, Traci explained what she could think of as the logic behind this decision. What it boils down to is that in the first trial, he was almost convicted. The jury was voting 11 to 1 for a guilty verdict. If Chris was convicted in a second trial, he could end up with 50 years to life. He felt that he could not take that risk.

As shocked as I was when I heard this news, I cannot even imagine how Traci felt when she was told.

But that’s our justice system. Prosecutors are incentivized to get convictions and close cases. Whether or not the defendant is actually guilty – well, that part doesn’t seem to matter too much. It’s really infuriating.

So there’s your introduction to The Only One in the Room podcast. The stories you’ll hear on that show are real life, just like we do on this podcast. Not every story has a happy ending, but the stories will affect you and you’ll remember them.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

So let’s get to the Listener Story. We end every episode this way, even a bonus episode – because we all love hearing a good story. If you have a 5-10 minute story, I really hope you send it to me so that everyone can hear it.

This Listener Story is about gorillas.

Stay safe, and I’ll see you back here in a week with the next regular episode of What Was That Like.

(Listener story)

Amelia

Hi Scott, this is Amelia and I live in Ontario, Canada. I am dropping you a voice note to tell you about the time I went Gorilla Trekking in Rwanda. Back in 2010. I decided I needed to go on Safari. I was inspired by a photography instructor that I had. He had been on Safari and showed me some of his photos, so I decided I was doing it. I was going to go. I called my amazing travel agent and told her I wanted to see gorillas in the wild before they were extinct, and she found the perfect trip for me. I actually went on a 3-week overland trip through Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda. But, this little side trip, if you will, to see the gorillas was separate from the organized trip that everyone was on to see the gorillas.

In Rwanda, you have to apply to the government to get a permit - this was in 2010, I don't know if the rules have changed - and only 56 people per day are granted these permits. You have to show up on your specified given day at, I think it was 5.00 or 5.30 in the morning at the base of Volcanoes National Park - this was kind of close to Ruhengeri, Rwanda. I got there on the day of. I was by myself. I travel alone frequently.

It's explained that they're going to put us into— I forget now if it was seven or eight groups of people, but the groups were determined based on your fitness level, and those who were super fit would go the farthest distance to hike and see a particular family, whereas maybe some other people who had physical limitations or were limited by their age or cardiovascular fitness would go to a family that was closer. Now, I had a car accident - quite a bad one, actually - a couple of months after I booked my trip but long before the trip actually happened.

So I booked all of this and got my permit, but then I ended up having a back injury. So, for that reason, I ended up going in the “easy group”, and we had a really sort of laxical experience. We just sort of had to hike up about - I don't know - 25-30 minutes. It was barely a hill. Really easy experience. I heard later in the day from the people that were in the tough group, they'd gone hiking up the mountain for about three hours with machetes, cutting through sugar cane to get there, and I thought, “Ugh, that doesn't sound like fun.” Plus, Rwanda is, like, hot, right?

Anyway, they tell us that they're waiting ahead and they're finding out where the gorillas are and they're tracking food stuff, droppings and chewed leaves, and figuring out where these families of gorillas are. Now, if you can picture this, you're in a single file line. Once you're in your group and you're assigned to X gorilla family, you walk in a straight file line at the front of the line, there's a guard with a gun. Now, forgive my ignorance, but I'm Canadian. We don't do guns up here quite the same way that people do in the States, so I couldn't tell you what kind of gun it was except that it was big. It was black and it looked like something a soldier in the Army or the Navy or some Navy seal would carry or something. It was very intimidating. Then, you have one of the guides that's got a radio and they're talking to other guides throughout the Volcanoes Park trying to figure out where the gorillas are.

You have your 7 or maybe it was 8 - I can't remember - tourists that are there with their permits. One or more of them may have had a Sherpa. I had a Sherpa carrying my photography equipment because of my back. Then, at the end of the row, the end of your single file line is another guard with another big scary gun. So we're going up the hill, up the mountain and they find the gorillas and they tell us they're coming just over the next crest, the next little hill, if you will. Sure enough, there they were. So you got to put everything down and you approach very gently, and you find a place to sit. Basically, you kind of let the gorillas wander around you. Like, no sudden movements, no eye contact. Obviously, you're not allowed to touch them or make any threatening gestures, nor would you want to, like, “Hello.” There's a silverback there. You'd be toast in about 4 seconds.

Anyway, I found a spot to sit and settle in for the next 60 minutes of awestruck amazing beauty. Let me tell you, you get exactly 60 minutes - not 61. Like, they are very strict about not wanting these animals to be habituated to humans. So, I was sitting in the forest and I heard some wrestling up above my head and I looked up. Probably around 6 or 8 feet up above me, there was this little juvenile gorilla. I later found out from the guides that were there that day that he was estimated to be two years old, but he was up in the tree and he was pulling the branches

back looking down at me. It was really cool. We just kind of had a moment where I didn't want to maintain eye contact, but I was looking at him and he was looking at me and it was kind of cool.

Anyway, I was sitting there and I sort of— you sort of feel something in your peripheral area before you even see it in your peripheral vision, and I just sort of had this sense that something was really close by. So, I very slowly turned my head to the right and, sure enough, I'm guessing, it was the mom - I'm not sure. There was another gorilla and it was less than two feet away from me sitting beside me. If you had just looked at me from a distance, you wouldn't have been able to see it. It was camouflaged. It was hidden in the bushes, but I looked to my right and we made eye contact, so I very slowly picked up my camera and took one image with a 50-mil lens just so I would be able to capture that moment. To this day, I absolutely love that photo. It took me right back to that moment, that minute, that experience, that feeling, and it's, that is one of the top 10 days of my life. But here's where things get a little bit more interesting.

So we finished our hour with the gorillas and it's time to head back down. I'm a polite young lady, so I wanted to tip the guides and the Sherpa and the guards. Now, I want to backtrack a little bit to the gun situation. I had some really strong feelings and reservations about the guns. I felt like it was my decision to apply for this permit and walk into this park and see these natural wild animals in their natural habitat. So if I get eaten by a gorilla or a lion, or charged by an elephant, that's my fault. I absolutely did not want an animal to get hurt because of some stupid decision I made as a human. But I was told time and again that they were there to protect us because of the wild animals. So fine.

We got back to the base and I had to go find my wallet. It's locked in a safe. I went to get money, get stuff out, and figure out what I'm giving to whom and everything. It only took a few minutes - like, maybe, 5 minutes to go and do all of that. I came back and the guards were gone. The guys with the guns, not just from my group, but from another group that had come back too. They were just completely gone. They'd been wandering around that morning at 5.30 in the morning in plain sight being assigned to different groups to go for hikes and stuff. But now, whoosh. Completely and totally gone.

So I went up to the guide who I had just spent the morning with. He led us up the mountain and brought us back down. He saw me with the gorillas. I don't remember his name off the top of my head. I'm sure I have a photo of him somewhere. But anyhow, I gave him a tip and I asked him where the guys with the guns went. He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "The guys with the guns that were protecting us from the animals." And he looked at me again and he said, "What are you talking about?" And for a split second, I thought, "Am I crazy? Was I imagining all of that? What's going on? What do you mean? What am I talking about? The guys with the big, huge guns were dressed like soldiers. The one in the front, the one in the back." He said, "I don't know what you're talking about. There's nobody with guns here. It's over." That was that. I mean, I just wanted to give them money, right? I wasn't going to tell them anything untoward.

So the next night - the next day, rather - I had decided because of my back that I was leaving the truck trip and striking out on my own. So I was going to stay at a hostel in Ruhengeri, Rwanda, and figure out the rest of the trip on my own without the itinerary of this company that was essentially turning their truck around and driving back to Nairobi. I didn't want to be on the truck anymore because the roads are terrible and my back was really problematic. So that's a story for another day. I found my own way back to Nairobi and it involved an airplane and a motorcycle and a guy with no legs. But anyway, I digress.

I borrowed a copy of the Lonely Planet from someone at the hostel just to sort of see the region on paper and try to make some plans and figure out what was what. That's when I think I found out what the secret of these guards with the guns might have been. If you look at a map of Rwanda and, specifically, Volcanoes National Park, you'll see that it borders the Congo DR. Remember, this was in 2010 so I don't know if things have changed. Back then, there were still some significant issues with child soldiers in the DR attacking or holding hostage tourists for money, like, ransom. So I believe that those guys with the guns were not there for protection of animals, but rather to keep pirates at bay. And by the time we got back down to the bottom of the park, they dispersed because it was bad for business. They don't want people that come during the day inquiring about permits and visas to get an opportunity to see these gorillas, to see guards with guns.

So that's my experience. I went gorilla trekking in Rwanda. If anybody gets a chance to go, please try to make it happen because you will not forget it and it will be one of the most incredible experiences of your life. Stay cool everyone.