

## **Almost There**

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 6: How does it feel to be known as a “felon” forever?

Dwayne Betts:

If you've been to prison, once you admit it, the next thing people want to know is why. And during my conversation with Rob Stewart, I found myself wanting to know why and found myself resisting it because the most important thing about him was not why he ended up in prison, but what he's doing with his life afterwards. He is a professor of criminology at the University of Maryland, my alma mater. His work focuses on issues like Ban the Box, which is this question of should you be permitted to ask somebody about their prior incarceration when admitting them to college. He works on voting rights issues, he works on issues about how long should a criminal conviction follow you into your future. If you should even have a future.

Rob Stewart:

Black and white answers, don't do it for me. Ban the Box is a black-and-white answer that's one little tiny piece and a much bigger puzzle. Restoring voting rights is just one piece and to me, it's more about how can we tell each other that although this person may not have the same experiences as me or look like me or be from the same place that I'm from, that we're part of the same community.

Dwayne Betts:

My name is Reginald Dwayne Betts. This is Almost There Podcast from Emerson Collective. Our whole conversation ended up circling the wagon around our own experiences, but also trying to push forward because that's what this work does. Trying to push forward to a better tomorrow where you don't get labeled forever by the thing that you did in the past. I wanted to know how did he get here?

Rob Stewart:

So it primarily started in prison. I was in prison for about 25 months and about, I don't know, halfway through I got a job working as a transitions tutor in a what basically it's just like a transitions was the three months before people would be released. We'd have a little class that was a couple days long and it'd be like, this is how to talk about your record when you're applying for a job and it's all those things. And we had a child support person that would come in and talk about how to deal with your child support. After doing it a couple times I started talking about how to apply to college, how to fill out a FAFSA.

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, wait, whose idea was that in terms of, because a lot of people don't even imagine people who have served time in prison wanting to apply for college. And how the hell did you know what a FAFSA was while in prison?

Rob Stewart:

So I had gone to college basically my senior year of high school. I went like dual... What is it?

Dwayne Betts:

Enrollment?

Rob Stewart:

Dual enrollment, right? So I went to my senior year of high school and college and failed miserably. My first semester in college when I was a senior, I went for about 16 credits and I successfully completed four, and one of them was golf. So and I got a C in golf. When I got to prison a couple years after that, the prison I was at, they had one college course. And the only reason I was able to get into the college course is because I was a tutor because I worked in the education department. It was a course on how to determine what you want to do in your life, but there was really no opportunities. And just having conversations with other people in there who were really struggling trying to patch together, correspondence classes and those types of things. One of the things that I tell people when they get released from prison is, you should go apply for college right now, fill out your FAFSA right now because you didn't make any money last year. So you're going to be eligible for a program.

Dwayne Betts:

So you know when I got out, I applied for college, but I went to prison when I was 16. I don't tell a lot of people this. I tell way too many people that-

Rob Stewart:

You wrote a book about it.

Dwayne Betts:

That's still right. But I come home and I apply for the FAFSA. They say, "Oh wait a minute, you have never paid taxes. So either you didn't exist or you were in prison." And I was like, "Yeah, I was in prison." And they was like, "Oh, I'm sorry." Because for them it was a joke. I had to actually file an official form to prove that I had been in prison as an explanation to the IRS why I had never filed taxes. So you would tell folks that they are eligible because they hadn't paid taxes the previous year and they'll be able to go to college for free. Were folks interested?

Rob Stewart:

Yeah, I think sometimes the romanticized version of what college is, what the actual work of college is isn't always super clear to people. Because when I got out of prison, I immediately enrolled in a technical school to finish up my two-year degree. So I had a good sense obviously, and I could help people and walk people through it.

Dwayne Betts:

What do you know about it when people come home? Because I actually feel like in prison there are people who are really hopeful about what the future looks like, about what possibilities are. I get out of prison and I go to Maryland in March because I'm like, you know what? I came home, I'm going to go to college. I show up in the office and I'm like, look, I'm trying to... I sign up, email the guy, set up a meeting with one of the admissions officers, I say, "I want to go to University of Maryland." They're like, "Well, it's March and we're in the second semester."

I don't know what the word semester means and he looked at me as if I had lost my mind and I just said, "Look man, I just got out of prison. I don't know what a semester is. Because the last time I was in school, I was in high school and we were on the quarter system. I feel like you're telling me I can't start today, that decisions have been made, but I just got out of prison." And the guy was really generous and he told me, "You should go to community college. You can't start now because their semester's already

started, but you could start in the summer semester." I wonder in terms of thinking about banning the box, and I know when you were at Minnesota you worked on Ban the Box.

Did any of your research or your conversation with folks find that some of the hope dampened, because even if you can't ask, you still have to tell people because you have to explain this gap in your life, this gap on your resume? I wonder what did you learn about in your work on Ban the Box about the difference between being hopeful when you're in prison and being hit with the reality of, yeah, not only did I not understand what college was, but I also didn't understand that maybe I can't run from this.

Rob Stewart:

I feel like when you're in prison, you tend to get two different messages. You get very hopeful, optimistic messages, everything is going to be great, you just have to do what you're supposed to do and everything's going to fall in line and whatnot. And then on the other side, you get a host of messages, particularly from staff and COs and whoever else that you know what, you're never really going to get a good job, so you just need to get whatever job is out there. You're not going to get into college, so you might as well just resign yourself to your lot in life. When we think about collateral consequences, we think about them as individual events or individual barriers to overcome.

But the reality is it's an overwhelming experience that envelops your life. It affects every area of your life. So not only if you were applying for a job, not only do you have to run into the barrier potentially of them asking about your record because even if they Ban the Box, they can still ask you about it at an interview. That doesn't stop them from doing that. So not only do you have that to deal with, but then you also have like you're talking about if there's a gap, right? Well, what have you been doing for the last six years? So well, I'm independently wealthy? I mean, what are you going to say to that, right? And-

Dwayne Betts:

When they asked me, I was like, "I'm going to tell you the truth. When I was a kid, I really wanted to be James Baldwin. And so I moved down South. "And because at my first job, they said, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony in the past seven years?" And I thought that myself, man, I've never been happier to have done eight years in prison. And you know funny thing is, I know dude didn't believe me, but I ended up getting the job. But it's true though. You either are in a situation where you're lying or you're struggling. So what was the sort of conclusion or you're data because I'm not feeling hopeful right now listening to you explain this to me.

Rob Stewart:

Yeah. Well, it was more kind of a cautionary tale for researchers, for advocates, for activists to stop thinking about these as just one-off issues to deal with. But that we need a wholesale rethinking of how this experience happens, how it works. It's not just about making these incremental steps with Ban the Box or restoring voting rights or any of those things. My whole approach to the work that I do is trying to push people to rethink how big these experiences affect people and their families and their communities from a holistic perspective. Because I think we have to really rethink the labels that we apply to people. I think we have to rethink how we reduce people from these very complex, infinitely complex human beings with views and experiences and likes and dislikes and all these other things to that one little event that happened in their life and that one little event becomes so determinative to the rest of their life.

Dwayne Betts:

I have two questions. What labels do? Like what do you refer to yourself as? Not even what do you refer to yourself as? Because I hope you refer to yourself as Rob.

Rob Stewart:

Well, no, but you bring up a good point because it is a forever struggle, right? Because formerly incarcerated, person who's impacted by the criminal legal system-

Dwayne Betts:

I actually don't like the word impacted. I think impacted refers to crushing collars.

Rob Stewart:

Well, my point is that none of these are perfect, right? And I have issues with all of them.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, the reason why I ask though is because you point out a bigger challenge and the challenge is not what you name yourself, but how do people respond to the fact that you went in prison and no name changes that? And you talked about that in terms of, well, what were you doing for the past six years? Or what were we doing for the past three years? Or why don't you know what the worst semester means? And so I sort of just wonder if what we should be doing is doing what you just said. Think about how these collateral consequences affect the whole community and get at why we're willing to accept those consequences. And I think those consequences, the reason why we accept them maybe is because they are a part of a lot of us who believe that they're legitimate. And so what we do is figure out how to erase the past.

And so I'm going to call you formerly incarcerated because it's a euphemism, it's [inaudible 00:10:19] when really it's like you were a prisoner. I like prisoner better because it says that somebody put me in prison, which is a place, and on some level, I was convicted of a crime. So it makes the action go both ways, whereas inmate doesn't put an action on the state. And formerly incarcerated, you could be a felon and have never been incarcerated. So I feel like formerly incarcerated and you could be formerly incarcerated and not be a felon and not have a misdemeanor. You know, you was just spend time in the jail.

Rob Stewart:

Right. Did you get booked and get released later that night? And I think that's exactly right and I struggle with it. I mean, Maryland banned the box on college applications like four years ago. And if you're a graduate student and you're applying to become a Ph.D. program, they still have a criminal record background check or a criminal background check question that you have to answer. In fact, as a faculty member there, one of the benefits is tuition remission so you can get a certain amount of credits while you're there.

So I was like, okay, I'm going to take this, basically just this certificate program take one or two classes a semester. So I go and apply and then they ask me about my criminal record. And they said, "Well, we can't allow you to admit you until you give us an explanation about your criminal record." And I'm like, "So just to be clear, I'm an assistant professor at this university. I teach 120 students a semester. I advise students, I do all these things, but you're not going to let me take this class online unless I give you a thorough explanation of my criminal record." And they're like, "Yep."

Dwayne Betts:

And it's interesting because I just wonder, so I don't, like when I had the bar exam business and they were saying, I don't know if we're going to let you be an attorney. I don't mind the questions. What I do

mind is the Byzantine process. I do mind the way in which bureaucracy corrupts everything. I do think that institutions, I would actually love for somebody to have best practices for how to approach this because I do understand somebody saying, "I am maybe not going to discriminate against you because you have a criminal record." But actually, I carjacked somebody. I think I owe society something more than time. I'm okay with owing an institution that I want to be a part of the explanation. I'm okay with owing an institution that is going to follow me for the rest of my life an explanation. What I'm not okay with is having no sense of what that explanation means.

What does it mean to actually have good character? I'm not afraid of saying that I'm a convicted felon. I'm not afraid of saying I carjacked somebody. I just think the real issue is that having said that, nobody knows what the measure is for anybody to let you live. And you would think that you could have A, have you done this? B, have you done this? C, have you been admitted to an academic institution that is a partner or similar to ours that suggests that this has already been vetted? There are ways in which this could be dealt with appropriately so that you having multiple degrees from multiple different institutions and being hired by that institution would not have to deal with that. And I will say I got into Northwestern Law School and I applied, and then the guy called me and said, "Yeah, I just want to talk to you. You know you've been to prison."

And I was like, "Yeah, I'm aware of that." He was like, "Yeah, let's talk." And I started saying something about my resume. He was like, "I get that your resume is excellent. I just wanted to get a sense of who you are as a person. I mean, this is a serious decision and do you know that you're going to have to pass character fitness and what else do you do in life?" And we talked for 15 minutes and then the next day I got admitted and I'm okay with that.

I wasn't upset about it at all. I was candid with him. I told him something about my life and he was just bet. So that's why I'm not really as aggressive about this notion that you shouldn't have to be accountable for what you did. I just feel like we should have some realistic sense of what we think that accountability should be and some realistic... I had to explain to my wife, so I'm okay. I mean, in my everyday life, I think I'm good with having to explain, but I just think that we should just have a measure of what the explaining means.

Rob Stewart:

From my dissertation research, it was one of the biggest issues that we ran into or I ran into, basically for my dissertation, I created profiles and applied as them to hundreds of colleges around the country and within each pair of applications. So two applications to each college and so one application had a felony record, the other one did not. And-

Dwayne Betts:

Were you white in all of them?

Rob Stewart:

No, half of them I was white, half of them I was Black. Because I checked the box. I mean, that's all it was.

Dwayne Betts:

You said half-and-half were you and mixed it up in terms, so was the felon white and-

Rob Stewart:

It was two white and two Black. It was immediately clear to me that the vast majority of universities around this country have no process or no policy or procedure. They just kind of wing it. They have some random person in the office call you up or whatever like in your situation. And I'm sure that person was perfectly nice and wonderful and thoughtful and whatnot, but what if that person was just having a bad day?

Dwayne Betts:

I know.

Rob Stewart:

And then that was their thing is they call people and do that. If it comes down to that, so many schools they kind of assemble this ad hoc committee of people who are typically the dean of students or something like the public safety person, police chief or whoever, people from psychology and residential life and all this. And they'll review these applications and they don't really know much about the person. They just know what's in the application. And then they decide yes or no on whether or not to put stipulations.

Dwayne Betts:

And you don't even know as the applicant that process is even going on.

Rob Stewart:

And they don't even know. I mean, because one of the biggest issues I ran into was so many of the applicants or my applications of my profiles didn't even get a response by the time the semester started. I applied at 800 schools or 400 schools. So 800 times, so many of them didn't ever actually get a decision because they applied in, I don't know, March or February, and the decision still hadn't been made by September. And so if I'm a real student and I want to move here and I want to go to your college, you're not even going to tell me. Or they would tell me right before the semester starts. So it puts you in an impossible situation. But what's important about that I think, is that so many of these places don't have ways, they don't have set procedures for how to review these things.

Because on your end of it, or my end of it, or an applicant's end of it, you don't know what they're trying to ask for, right? Do they want a fancy narrative? Do they want a redemption narrative where I want to talk about how terrible it was, what I did was terrible, but I did all these great things and now look how fantastic of a person I am? Or did they just want to know the straight facts or what is it? And there's so many, there are hundreds and thousands and maybe millions of these stories of people who they want to get licensed to be a social worker. They want to get licensed to be-

Dwayne Betts:

A real estate agent.

Rob Stewart:

...a chemical dependency counselor or a real estate agent, a CPA, like any of these jobs that all require this and they have these black boxes. You have to submit these forms. You have to maybe do an oral presentation or whatever, or not presentation, but you have to speak and then they just make a decision.

Dwayne Betts:

I do find that the black box exists for two reasons. One, because people who know that it exists frequently don't have the skill to tell the story. And two, because the people who create the black box are often operating on the fly. They're like, it's a compelling candidate to do with the prison. I don't know what to do. Have you ever dealt with this? No. He's applying for a Ph.D. program. Why would he be doing this? I don't know. And it's in criminology. Does he know that criminology is about studying people who have been in prison? Maybe he wants to study his family. I was just joking. You could see a world in which you got people not only being ad hoc but actually being baffled, actually being like, what do I do? And not knowing anybody to lean on to figure it out. Because the ways in which we have thought about it have not actually... It's like it's not at the top of the public agenda even 15 years after the new Jim Crow was published.

Rob Stewart:

And they don't have people in the room who have expertise in this, it's a missed-

Dwayne Betts:

We should start a consulting agency. This is how we should pay off our debts and fees is start a consulting agency where we help these institutions create a framework that is legitimate, that could be a model framework for other institutions on how to address this problem. We could talk about this forever, but one of the things I think is fascinating is as an academic and as a scholar, I don't think everybody who has lived experience has anything to say. Frankly, I think that they might have something to say about their experience.

They might have a lot of information that becomes data for academics and for scholars. But as a criminologist, it feels like one of the things you do is say, "No, but I am here to look at something closely. I'm here to study it. I'm here to articulate what I think it means for the world." And in this sense, you're not just working on issues of Ban the Box and access to college, you also working on other issues like voting. And what I wanted is, I remember I got locked up in Virginia, I moved to Maryland. If I would've stayed in Virginia, I couldn't vote.

Because I moved to Maryland I could vote as long as I was off probation. And so I got off probation early and I was suddenly able to vote even though I wouldn't have been able to vote, say in Florida or in Virginia where I [inaudible 00:19:57] my crime. I wonder, I know you working on that issue as well. I wonder, one, what was Minnesota? And then two, what has your work been around these voting issues and what do you think about the voting question? Because I actually think the voting question maybe is easier than the college question because it should just be you can vote and there's no box to check.

Rob Stewart:

So Minnesota doesn't allow previous people from voting who are on probation or parole or in prison. So currently serving a sentence. But that was actually a consideration for me when I was applying to college or applying for jobs. I applied to a couple jobs in Virginia, but I pulled back some of those applications because I had other interview opportunities. And I wasn't sure about being able to vote in Virginia because, at the time, there was a governor that signed an executive order, but that doesn't guarantee that's forever. And there were a couple other states where I would not be able to vote because they disenfranchised people who even passed their sentences.

Dwayne Betts:

Which is quite strange because you could be a convicted felon and say be in Florida and I guess theoretically not be able to vote, but Florida can't give you your rights back because your conviction is in another state. So what do you? You're just in this twilight zone.

Rob Stewart:

You could get a pardon from the original state, but that's about it.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, no, but the original state is like, bro, we busy and you don't live here or the original state is no, you could vote here and we don't give pardons. We give you your voting rights back. You have your voting rights back. I mean, if you want to vote, come back home. It's just interestingly gray space that I wonder if your work is delving into that. What does it mean that if you have this mark on your record, that you could end up in a twilight zone basically?

Rob Stewart:

It can be a jurisdictional maze. It's also the laws at individual states are super complicated. In Tennessee, the story of Pamela Moses, who was sentenced to six years in prison for registering to vote while on probation. And not only was she on probation, but she had a prior case that was one of these specific cases that disenfranchises you for life and there was a lot of confusion between it. I mean, it's a complicated story, but to me, when I talk to people about voting, and I think I talk about disenfranchisement, particularly policymakers or people in the community and who are kind of like, well, you know, broke the law, then there should be some penalty. Sure. But is that removing me as a... Stripping away one of the most fundamental components of citizenship? Or is it some other thing? And we can talk about the other punishments or whatever, like jail and prison and probation and all that.

But to me, the idea that we take people's voting rights is so... I push people to try to reconsider that and to think about that. Why do we do that? And there's historical explanations for this. This didn't just come out of nowhere. I mean, this has been going on for 2000 plus years. It has its roots in Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece and the way that they would strip citizenship from people for certain types of crimes, but not kill them, not execute them. When I talk to people, I mean, I really encourage people to really rethink why it is that we do this. It's one of the most pro-social things that you can engage in. People who vote, they vote because they care about their community in some way. Now what they vote for and their particular perspectives or whatever, I mean, but to them, they really care about their community and what happens.

And so that's why people want to vote. You don't just vote for fun. And so when we take away one of the most pro-social activities and take away the possibility, it creates a situation where people don't feel part of the community. Why would they? Why should they? I was disenfranchised for 10 years, and when I got out of prison, I knew that I couldn't vote. I didn't know that I couldn't take part in party caucuses. In Minnesota, we have party caucus or they have party caucuses. And so I get out of prison and one of the college professor or a community college professor encourages us go participate in the party caucuses, do the thing. And we were selecting a governor that year. So I was like, "Okay, I'll do that." And so I go and do that. And then they read off the rules. And one of the rules is you have to be eligible to vote on voting day in order to participate and I had to get up and walk out of the room.

Dwayne Betts:

And imagine had they not read those rules and you participated and you just committed a misdemeanor or a felony-

Rob Stewart:

A felony.

Dwayne Betts:

...I mean, man.

Rob Stewart:

And I have a whole... So the next phase of some... So I have a couple different aspects of the research that I do on voting, on political ideology or political beliefs, ideology, social beliefs, and other things of people with criminal records, with felony records. Because I think that we have these assumptions about people that people with felony records are like defacto or would be automatic constituents of the Democratic Party. And I don't think that's true at all. And it wasn't, at least where I'm from in Southern rural Minnesota, everybody, nearly every person I know who has a felony record is as far away from being a left-wing liberal as you could possibly be.

Dwayne Betts:

And to be crass about it, what you're acknowledging is that there are more than Black people in prison and there are more than Democrats in prison. And there's an underlying assumption, though, I think in this whole country at most, that prison is only filled with Black people and brown people, and that prisoners only filled with progressives, which again, prison is as varied and complex as the entire country. And there might be real disparities in terms of who gets incarcerated. But I think that you're right, I think that we should take more time to acknowledge the true complexity of that.

Rob Stewart:

We did some polling in Florida of people with felony records and ended up finding that there was overall stronger support for Donald Trump than Joe Biden in the 2020 election. In part because Florida has a couple large cities and a lot of rural areas. And I don't think we always-

Dwayne Betts:

And you mean more supportive for Donald Trump than Joe Biden amongst people who have criminal convictions that bought him from the-

Rob Stewart:

Right. And in Minnesota, in my home state of Minnesota, Hennepin and Ramsey County, which is Minneapolis and St. Paul, 65% of people who are disenfranchised in Minnesota live outside of those two counties. So they don't live in the Twin Cities, they live in outstate Minnesota and outstate Minnesota is very white. It's white, it's rural. I mean, it's hard sometimes to talk about this because I don't want to belittle the fact that there are these extensive disparities that exist because they absolutely do. But in terms of raw numbers-

Dwayne Betts:

I tell people all the time, "Yo, most of the people in prison are white."

Rob Stewart:

Exactly.

Dwayne Betts:

I just tell them all the time, and I love... I mean, I'm not going to say I love saying it, but it's just one of those things that when you remind white folks of it, they be like, "For real? It's white people in prison?" Yeah. I'm like, "Yeah, it's white people in prison." And you know what? I like to remind the folks who have served time in prison who aren't Black, the reason why this is something that we should work on together and dependent of whatever our ideological beliefs are, it's because you are just as invisible as I am. And it might even be worse because your invisibility is independent of what people who believe politically, what you might believe they don't even care about that you just literally just don't exist.

Rob Stewart:

Yeah. It's exactly right. And it's a conversation I have all the time too.

Dwayne Betts:

I mean, I ain't going to lie, man. I don't get a chance to talk to a lot of people who've done time in prison and who are doctors, who have a PhD who are actively writing and then actually choose to write about these issues. It seems traumatizing. Why choose this work? I mean, you're a criminologist, but you study sociology, so you could have chose to go into another area of sociology. Why choose to work on these issues?

Rob Stewart:

So earlier you had said something about how having the experience doesn't automatically mean that you would bring insight into it or beyond your story and I totally agree with that. I think that for me, I looked at the experience contributing to my work as providing another window through which to understand these problems and these issues. I'm a white hetero male who's middle-aged now, I guess 42 from rural Minnesota. My experience in the prison system is obviously specific to that set of identities, but there are also many experiences in prison and throughout the system that I think are maybe not universal, but are similar for everybody or most people. So I ended up thinking about questions that don't automatically occur to people who have done this for decades, but who have no direct experience with the system. So I think I bring some value in terms of the experience, but again, I see it as kind of an additional way to think about this.

It's really the training that I have that really my doctoral training that I think really gives me expertise in this. But in terms of the trauma, I guess I saw this as while I was in prison and I saw all of these things and recognizing the difficulties that people were going through. I come from a relatively privileged background and a lot of the people I knew, a lot of the guys that I worked with absolutely did not. I have an opportunity to try to right the ship a little bit for people in those situations and potentially kind of open some doors for people to bring more people in.

I was in the sociology department as a graduate students, and sometimes I talked to other grad students and they would study culture, they would study gender, they would study religion, or whatever, and they would want to study inequality. And there a lot of that was the foundation for a lot of people. They want to understand oppression and things like that. But then they would scoff when we would talk about prison and crime and punishment and all that. And it never made sense to me because we have a state-sanctioned system that is imposed on people all through the country in incredibly unequal ways, and people don't want to study that. It doesn't make any sense to me.

Dwayne Betts:

Also, it's sort of like the root of a subsection of people who suffer from all of those other kind of inequalities. But let me ask you this, because the podcast is called Almost There, and I'm trying to get a sense of what that means for the people who come here, particularly people who work on really complex and kind of entangled issues. I feel like this issue is a Gordian Knot, so I wonder what it means for you to be almost there.

Rob Stewart:

It means that I have to continue doing the work that I'm doing. There's never a there for me. It's always working towards a destination, but the destination is always going to keep moving away from me because I don't think that there's ever a point at which we're going to be able to eliminate all of the injustices that exist. But I think we have to keep trying. And I think for the work that I do, my hope is that throughout my career and throughout my life, I'm able to make at least some type of dent.

So when I think about being almost there, I think about there being more work to do. These are not easy questions, but yet I think as a public, we treat them as if they are just like these colleges that create these ad hoc procedures on the fly. We don't put enough thought into it because we don't actually... I don't think we appreciate how difficult and how these things are just piled on and it becomes this overwhelming thing that, and maybe not overwhelming, maybe not the right word, but it's something that just envelops your entire life.

And so I think it's an incredibly complex, it's an incredibly fraught situation, and I think we have to be very considerate about how we talk about it and not just black and white answers don't do it for me. Ban the Box is a black-and-white answer, frankly. I think it's a great idea, but it's one little tiny piece in a much bigger puzzle. Restoring voting rights is just one piece, and to me, it's more about how can we tell each other that and recognize the humanity in each other and recognize that although this person may not have the same experiences as me or look like me or be from the same place that I'm from, that we're part of the same community and that we should care for each other, we should respect each other for each other's humanity. And it's so easy to just other people because they're just that one little label.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, here's for creating new labels, or maybe here's for remembering the first netlabel, which is whatever it means to breathe in the world, is for remembering that we all share that identity as people in this world who breathe, who think, who love, who suffer. And that our experiences can't be reduced to any of the various labels that we use to categorize them.

Rob Stewart:

Absolutely. Amen.

Dwayne Betts:

Since we taped this interview, the voting law has actually changed in Minnesota. As of March 2023, folks with a felony conviction now have their voting rights restored once they leave prison instead of after they complete parole or probation. I mean, listen, had this been the law when I came home, I would've immediately been able to register to vote and start paying attention to what's happening in my community. This change will allow as many as 55,000 formally incarcerated people to vote. That's progress. There's more that we need to do, of course, but this is progress. Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider, and Kristen Mueller, along with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon, and Amy Lowe

from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliott. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.