**Name of Project: R.O.O.T.S of Sunflower County**

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**Name of Interviewer(s): Kyle Pernell, A’Xavier Carpenter, Angela Zusman, Jawaski Gardner**

**Name of Interviewee(s): Shaka Senghor**

**Name of file used for transcription** (audio and/or video file): Audio file (Shaka Senghor)

[1:30] KP: After viewing your Ted talk show, you spoke about your parents divorcing, what advice do you have for young men who are experiencing the same situation.

[1:45] SS: So the advice that I would have for young men or a young woman who is experiencing the same situation the divorce of parent is to recognize what their parent’s issues are and what their issues are. Sometimes children tend to take on the burden of their parents issues and in reality they don’t have to own that. So I would definitely tell them to really take time to step back and recognize that whatever their parent is going through has nothing to do with them.

[2:11] KP: Was that a hard process with you?

[2:18] SS: The process of dealing with my parent’s divorce was very hard because it destabilized our family. I was used to my father being in the household. When they changed the dynamics in our household changed.

[2:29] AC: Can you expand more on the 3 A’s as you mentioned in your ted talk?

[2:34] SS: So the three A’s that I mentioned in my Ted talk are acknowledgement, apology, and atonement. Uhm, Those are three things that I think are really important to help young men and women return to society. But also it’s just important in everyday life. Because anytime that you cause harm to somebody first you need to acknowledge that you hurt somebody. Once you acknowledge that then the next step is to apologize. The 3rd and final step is to atone which means to make it right—to do whatever is necessary to undo the damage that you’ve caused.

[3:09] KP: What brought about these 3 A’s?

[3:14] SS: I really stepped back—So, the thing that brought about the acknowledgement, apology, and atonement was me stepping back and realizing that that was a process that help me heal but also help me find value in my own life that I can help contribute to society once I got out. And I felt like it was a necessary part of my journey to becoming my best self-- was recognizing that these three things had to happen.

[3:39] JG: After release from prison, what was your first goal?

[3:42] SS: After being released from prison, my first goal was to establish myself in the community as a mentor and a person that young men and women that were growing up the way that I grew up could turn to. That was really really important to me to be a voice that I wish that I had when I was young or the ear I wish I would have had when I was young. Those were like my major goals was really establishing myself as a mentor in the community.

[4:14] KP: What made you want to tell your story? Why is it so important?

[4:17] SS: The thing that—I can’t even really say that I necessarily wanted to tell my story. What I found in my experience was that it was important to tell my story. Because my story is the story of many men and women who are currently incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. And I realized that through telling my story I can help people understand how our system works and what doesn’t work in the system but also help build up compassion and empathy for those you are incarcerated and impacted by incarceration.

[4:45] KP: What was the purpose of telling your story?

[4:50] SS: The purpose was to raise awareness and to help people realize that no matter what you’ve done in life we’re all worthy of a second chance. And if you can see the humanity in somebody, it’s a lot easier to help them become the best person that they are capable of becoming.

[5:10] KP: Yes sir. Are you doing anything to better that person or better those who have been in prison?

[5:15] SS: The reality is that everybody who has been to prison has to do the work on their own. Yu can introduce people to information but it’s entirely up to them what they do with that information. What I do on a personal level is work with those who are trying to do something different and meaningful with their lives. And whatever resources I can share with them I feel like that’s my responsibility to do so.

[5:35] AC: How is your story impacting young men and boys of color?

[5:45] SS: So, the way that my story has been able to impact young men and boys of color is it gives them access to possible outcomes if they chose to go down the wrong path and I think that’s really important. It’s easy for somebody to tell you not to do something that they’ve done. But I think that when you hear it from somebody who has actually lived the experience and who has gone through all of it helps you to look at things in a little different light. So, that’s the way my story has been the most helpful.

[6:12] JG: There is a quote from your ted talk that specifically says that ‘envision a world where young men won’t be held hostage from their past.’ Can you explain more of that in detail?

[6:32] SS: So, toward the end of my ted talk I talked about men and women envisioning a world where men and women won’t be held hostage to their past. And I spoke about that largely because as human beings we’re all subject to make poor decisions, to make mistakes, to do things wrong but it doesn’t mean that we can’t or that we aren’t more than what that particular issue was. So, I really felt that it was important to help people see us as whole human beings but also to step back and look at themselves; because most human beings have done something hurtful and harmful to other people and nobody would want to be judge for that for the rest of their lives. And I wanted to make sure that I got that point across in a very clear and concise way.

[7:20] JG: How has your trials contributed to the work that you do now?

[7:25] SS: Can you repeat that question?

[7:27] JG: How have your trials contributed to the work that you do now?

[7:32] SS: So the work that I do now is rooted in everything that I’ve gone through and it’s largely based on the fact that I knew that I would’ve had different outcomes if I had different information. If I would’ve have a different type of support, my life didn’t have to take the tragic turn that it took and two families didn’t have to be devastated. And having that experience really helped me to understand why it’s so important to help me share my story and the work that I do.

[8:05] KP: After listening to your interview with Oprah, you talk about receiving a letter from your son. When you received the letter what was your first introduction to understanding that if you didn’t become an agent for change then your son legacy would die?

[8:24] SS: So in the interview I did with Oprah, I spoke with her about a letter that I had received from when I was incarcerated. The letter was from my son who was around 10 or 11 at the time and once I read that letter I realized that I had robbed him and deprived him as a father and that I owed him a father. And I made a decision that rather I was getting out of prison or not that I would live my life in way that he could look to and say ‘ you know what I respect him even though he made poor decisions in the past I respect the man he is today because of the effort and the work he put forth’. And I believe that was important to ensure that the legacy continued on in a healthy way.

[9:05] KP: What was so profound about this letter to you?

[9:07] SS: I think the thing that was really profound about my son’s letter is that it was coming from an innocent child who has no perspective of the world that I grew up in at that time. And just hearing his innocence and having these big ideas and thoughts about personal responsibility, that was just very humbling.

[9:35] AC: If you would not have received a letter from the victim’s family, would you have been able to forgive yourself?

[9:40] SS: So had I not received the letter from the family member of the victim, I’m not sure that I would be able to forgive myself because even when I got the letter it wasn’t easy. It wasn’t an easy thing to just up and do. It took some time. It took some time for me to really set back and think about the impact that my decision had on his family and my family and all the people who were innocent. It’s a heavy burden to bare. It’s one of the reasons that I do the work that I do now. I would never want a young person to live with the burden that they’ve taken somebody else’s life and devastated two families in the process. And had I not go that letter I don’t if I would have been able to forgive myself. But I’m happy and fortunate that I was a recipient of such a powerful letter.

[10:33] AC: Would you have been able to ultimately pursue your redemption?

[10:37] SS: I think that would have been a little bit more difficult and honestly when it comes to pursue my own redemption, I never really set out to pursue my own redemption I just always wanted to do the right thing. I knew the right thing was to use the skillset that I have to help young men and women take a different path.

[11:00] KP: After all your trial, are you thankful for them? Have they made you the man you are today?

[] SS: Uhm, am I thankful? I mean I’m definitely thankful for the experiences that I’ve had in terms of overcoming the trials and tribulations that I went through. I’m thankful for the men and women who entered my life at a time where I needed it most and contributed to me being the man that I am today. So, I’m not the type of person that really dwells too much in the past. If you think about it most car accidents happen when people are backing up and I try to live my life moving forward. Largely because I can’t undo the things of the past. I can definitely learn from it and I think I’ve extracted those life lessons that allows me to move forward in a way that’s healthy. I wouldn’t go back in rewrite it because you can’t do it. So, you just have to live with things as they are and you know we’re all a sum total of the life we’ve lived experiences.

[12:05] KP: At what point did you realize that regardless of forgiveness and redemption you needed to be prepared through the study of application?

[12:11] SS: Uhm at what point? I would say the point that I realized that studying and applying the things that I learned would be pivotal when turning my life around is when I read Malcolm X’s autobiography. And it was such a powerful book because it really pointed to how disciplined he was as a scholar. He studied everything. He read the dictionary from A-Z to make sure that he was capable of using the English language in a way that empowered people and challenged systems. So, once I read that book I knew that if I wanted to be anything in my life that going to have to apply myself and put in that extra work while everybody else was resting.

[12:57] KP: If you had 2 minutes to encourage youth, especially young men of color, what would you say?

[13:01] SS: So if I had two minutes to encourage young men of color specifically, I probably wouldn’t take the whole two minutes. I would honestly challenge them on a couple of things. One is to never settle for mediocrity when greatness is available. Two is to take all the excuses off the table and three is to master your own thinking. Uhm, the reason that I think it’s important for young men and young women to master their own thinking because the world as we know it exists largely based on ideas. So, people giving birthed to ideas and manifesting greatness out of the ideas that they come up with. And so once you’re conscious of your ability to think and to exist as the thing that you desire you become the master of your own universe. And I think that’s really important and I really push young men and women to aspire toward greatness. I think we settle for mediocrity too much. Not only in our communities but our world as a whole. And the reality is that inherently we are great. And what you’re great at is entirely up to you to decide. Whatever you’re going to do I believe that you should be the best at it otherwise why do it.

[14:15] KP : Is there anything that you would like to add?

[14:48] SS: So, the one thing that I would like to add is that it’s a pleasure to sit and have a conversation with three intelligent. I’ll extremely honored to have been doing this interview with you guys and I look forward to more great things from you. And I emphasize great because mediocrity is not acceptable. Thank y’all for your time.