**FOR LIFE: THE PODCAST**

Episode 104: Kwame Ajamu

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| **Kwame Ajamu (KA)** | “The first song that came on ironically, was Elton John “Philadelphia Freedom”, and you know, and that just was so- so much of a- a nerve shot to me. I'm on the way to death row and “Philadelphia Freedom's” playing on the radio.” |
| **HOST VO** | **This is FOR LIFE: THE PODCAST, from Sony Pictures Television and ABC. I’m your host, Isaac Wright Jr.****In America, it is estimated that there are thousands of wrongful convictions each year. Thousands more are overcharged and over-sentenced. In 1991, I was one of the thousands of people wrongfully convicted of a crime. I was sentenced to life in prison and, unfortunately, had no hope for freedom and no one to fight for me other than myself.** **I taught myself the law and, as a paralegal, I was able to help some of my fellow inmates get reduced sentences and released from wrongful convictions, while seeking my own justice.****After eventually getting my own conviction overturned, I became a lawyer, and have continued to be an advocate for those in need. My story also inspired the new fictional drama series FOR LIFE on ABC.****But there are so many others with stories like mine.****In this six-part series, we’re hearing real-life, first-person accounts of other wrongfully convicted men and women who, against all odds, prevailed, were exonerated – and emerged from their unthinkable adversity with grace and purpose.****These are stories of tenacity, faith, friendship, transformation, compassion, and family.** |
| **Host VO** | **Kwame Ajamu was 17 years old when he, his brother, and their friend were charged with robbing and killing a salesman outside a Cleveland convenience store in May 1975.****All three young men were convicted of murder and sentenced to death.** **The sole evidence against Kwame -- then known as Ronnie Bridgeman -- and his co-defendants was the fabricated eyewitness testimony of a 12-year-old boy named Edward Vernon.** **Kwame’s story is one of transformation. In prison, Kwame found refuge in learning, and his thirst for knowledge transformed him intellectually -- while the painful loss of those closest to him transformed him spiritually.** **The person Kwame became would change the course of his life and the lives of those around him.****This is Kwame's story.** |
| **KA** | My name is Kwame Kemawu Ajamu. I'm 62 years old. I live in Cleveland, Ohio. I came from the very tormented part of Cleveland, at that particular time in the ‘70s. I was raised in, uh, the Hough Glenville area during the riots of both ‘66 and ‘68. But my family would move just one precinct over in the Cedar Mount Pleasant area, which is like more family-ish. You could still visit someone's house without knocking. And my family was no exception to that. With my mother especially. It wasn’t nothing to come home and she'd be cooking something extra, you know, for one of the boys out the neighborhood or something like that. I was an extroverted person when I was- all of my teens actually. When I was 15, 16 I really was outgoing. That's when I really got into sports to that level where I could play with the big boys. I always was, uh, very good in playing chess and I shoot an excellent game of pool to this day. |
| **HOST VO** | **Although Kwame’s neighborhood was tight-knit and family-oriented, the city of Cleveland experienced significant unrest in the 1960s and ‘70s.** |
| **KYLE SWENSON** | My name is Kyle Swenson. I am a reporter from Cleveland, Ohio.In Cleveland, Ohio, beginning in the- in the ‘60s and then obviously spilling over into 1970s and 1975 there was an incredible amount of- of racial tension in the city. In 1968 the Glenville Shootout, which was a moment when a group of black radicals opened fire on a group of Cleveland police officers and a number of people were killed and it led to a large scale race riot. And that really exacerbated a lot of tensions between the police and the African American community.  |
| **KA** | May 19th, 1975 was the life changing, um, incident that would occur with myself, my brother, my good friend Ricky Jackson, and our families.Myself, Ricky Jackson, were- had just come from playing ball up at the court.We ran into two girls, which were sisters, Sue Jean and Darlene Vernon, who was sitting upstairs on the porch screaming down, going, “Hey, what's going on?”So we stopped and we talked to them for all of five, ten minutes when a car pulled up and inside the car was her young brother Edward. Another girl who would be the one to tell us from the window that, “Hey guys, something's happened up at Mr. Robinson’s store and there's a man laying on the ground dead.”A United States money order salesman by the name of Harold J. Franks, 59 year old Caucasian man, entered our neighborhood either to pick up his last order or drop off his last orders.Mr. Franks was robbed. He was accosted, robbed, and killed- shot outside of the store. |
| **Host VO** | **At the crime scene, police questioned the crowd, asking anyone with information about the crime to come forward.** **12-year-old Edward Vernon, the brother of the girls who walked over with Kwame and Ricky, stepped forward.** |
| **KA** | Edward Vernon, he had one of those peanut heads where everybody would, when they go by him, they would slap him on the back of it or give him a quick bump. You know, he was that kid. And so now on this particular day, he made his self not be that kid. He was someone important, because he was talking to the police about a murder, you know. |
| **KS** | So Ed Vernon was a younger kid from their neighborhood. He was the paper boy in the neighborhood. He was about 12 years old. He kind of had big, thick glasses.And I think Ed was just trying to be helpful. And he- he raises his hand and says that he knows something or he can help.Ed was picked up, the officers wouldn't let Ed's mom come. They bring him down by himself, he's a 12 year old kid. They make him go through this lineup, and he knew he had kind of gotten in over his head.And so at this point he decided he wasn't going to pick anybody and hope that that would be the end of it. So he’s shown the lineup, he doesn't pick anybody out. And the detectives started slamming the table, throwing things around, basically saying, you know, “stop lying for those guys.” And then they tell Ed that, you know, if he doesn't go along with this they're going to arrest his parents for perjury, particularly his mother who was sick with cancer at the time.So you have a scared little kid who's bawling, crying in a- in a police, interrogation room being screamed at by white detectives and he capitulates. He says, “okay,” and they sit down right then and write out a statement from Ed, implicating the three young men in this crime. |
| **KA** | He came out of that room and he signed papers and he wrote a whole script about what he saw, but he actually didn't. |
| **Host VO** | **Edward Vernon said Kwame attacked the salesman with a pipe and threw acid on him, and that Ricky shot the man dead and fired the bullet that critically injured the store owner's wife.** **He also claimed to see Kwame and Ricky jump into a getaway car driven by Kwame's brother, Wiley.** **Six days later, based on Edward's account, all three men were arrested.**  |
| **KA** | The morning of May 25th, 1975. It was- it was a cool, calm morning.And I laid there that morning asleep, curled up in a ball like I normally do because I sleep in the fetal position.But my feet was up from up under the cover and getting cold. And just when I realized my feet was getting cold, I opened my eyes to realize that there was a police officer pulling my feet and that there were at least 12 other police officers engaged with their shotguns, .38 caliber pistols pointed at little old me in the bed. I immediately sat up in the bed and I bolted past them to my mother's room, simply because that was my mother and I knew that if those cops were in my room, no telling what they were doing around the corner where my mother was at- who was a heart patient.My mother's crying telling them that uh, she don't know what's going on. You know, why are you guys in here? And so I intervened in the conversation.And so by me being 17, I was arrested and taken to a juvenile detention center.I wasn’t charged with a murder and a robbery at that particular time. I was arrested only for obstructing police business. It took maybe 12 days before they came back and actually had a- a charge and an indictment against me. |
| **Host VO** | **When Kwame, Wiley, and Ricky were arrested - none of them had criminal records.****All three were charged with murder, attempted murder, and robbery.** |
| **KA** | When I went into the courtroom procedures, of course I didn't know about the law. But I remember specifically going into the judges chambers and the judge telling me that they wanted to offer me ten flat.And if you take the time, I remember, “if you take these ten years, you’ll get out when you're 27, you can go on with your life. You're a strong young buck.” That's exactly what the hell he said to me. And I remember saying, “why would I take ten years when I didn't do nothing?” You know, why would I do that? |
| **Host VO** | **Kwame rejected the plea agreement he was offered - and kept proclaiming his innocence.****Despite the fact that he was still a juvenile, he faced the three felony charges as an adult at his jury trial.** |
| **KA** | My very first day, I'll never forget it. I'm 17, I'm skinny. The- the jumpsuit that they got on me was about two times my size. So, you know, the legs and the arms are just folded up and almost tied.They got me in belly chains and shackles. So- so- so I looked like something off of one of those slave ships where they show them going down to the cotton fields.I'm going in here into this all white, seemed like a country club. Everybody's sitting in there. Real stiff, real pompous, if you will. So I was just in trouble and I knew it from the very upshot of the word “Go.”I sat there in that courtroom and I seemed as if I was the smallest thing in the entire world. The benches and pews was full. And in the second row I saw my older sister and my older brother, my mother was too sick with the heart situation to come everyday. So she didn't make the first day of the trial.I look into my brother's eyes and my brother, my oldest brother quickly looked away. He was just murdered inside.And, I'm about my sister, that was what was sad, because, you know, I- I looked in her... I looked in her eyes and- and I knew that… I actually knew that I’d never see her again.  |
| **KS** | So the whole neighborhood knew that these guys were innocent. There was such a level of distrust and fear between black Clevelanders and the police department at that time that- that everyone was terrified to get involved in this situation. No one was ready to stand up and raise their hand and say, ‘I have information’, because they were afraid that they would get pulled into this and maybe even be the fourth defendant in this case. |
| **Host VO** | **No physical or forensic evidence linked Kwame to the crime.****The key witness for the prosecution was Edward Vernon, whose testimony was inconsistent and differed significantly from the original statement he gave police.****Kwame’s defense did not provide a rigorous defense. His attorneys called few witnesses, but those who appeared were discredited by the prosecution.** |
| **KA** | On the day that that the verdict came in my case- it was raining that day, actually. And I remember- I remember saying God was crying. And the jury piled in. And just like when you read in those old books about how, you know, guys get messed around by the jury and they don't look up at you, you know.They were all looking at one another's feet as they walk in. None of them looked over at me. I said, well, you know, they're gonna- they’re going to sink me. That was the word back then, they're gonna sink me. You know, I didn't- I didn’t know how far I would be sunk, but I knew that they were going to sink me that day.And so we sit there and I sit there with my two attorneys, which I affectionately tagged as Heckle and Jeckle.The judge said, “well, you've been found guilty of a capital offense.” I got cold, I got sweaty, I got hot, I- I got dizzy. I couldn't breathe good. I was hyperventilating, but I didn't show one sign of that to that man that had just gave me that- that sentence. But inside I was like Smokey Robinson said about the tears of the clown.I thought that at any minute the judge would eventually say, “ah, right. I’ve had enough of this,” you know? It never happened.Prior to that jury coming back, I was thinking that maybe I- you know, I could get a hung trial out of this. You know, I did have faith in common, you know, common courtesy of the courtroom and the courtroom could obviously see that there's clearly no sense of fairness in this trial. But none of that happened.My mother was there for that, for the verdict being read. She was there, as was my older sister and brother. My aunt was at every trial date. She was there for every day. And when they said that I was guilty of capital murder my aunt got up and left. I would never see her again either.I was bottomed out in- in emotion. I was spiritually drained, because I did not know what was gonna happen and what to do. And I was totally helpless. When I initially went to prison to be sentenced to die was at the Southern Ohio correctional facility, and that is, um, four and a half hours drive from- from Cleveland.We left in a Plymouth Fury, 1973 Plymouth Fury. I'll never forget the car. And I never forget the deputy sheriffs that transferred me. It was two deputy sheriffs, elected to play the radio while we drive.The first song that came on ironically, was Elton John “Philadelphia Freedom”, and you know, and that just was so- so much of a- a nerve shot to me. I'm on the way to death row and “Philadelphia Freedom's” playing on the radio.When we got to prison after that long drive was when terror started. And they had a captain who, I'll never forget. He said, you know, “you- you're no longer who you thought you were. You’re mine now and you're in my prison and- and why you standing there and you still got clothes on?” You know and they stripped me and did all that stuff and sprayed that stuff on me, that burn, you know? And instead of taking me directly to the cell, they took me to the cell which was at the end of the range/death house that housed the electric chair itself.And so that- that day became extremely terrifying from that point on because, “hey, you know, look there, got a hot date for you, you’re sure to meet her.”I never forget that, you know, because it's burned into my mind. |
| **Midroll** | **In prison, Kwame would be driven to transform himself to become the man who would eventually get his freedom back. Transformation is a theme that can also be found in Sony and ABC’s fictional drama series FOR LIFE.** **Here is star Nicholas Pinnock, speaking about how transformation plays an important role in the series.** *What we find throughout the series is, Aaron, before he went into jail and then into prison. Aaron as the prisoner, as the lawyer in court. And Aaron as the husband with his family that are still on the outside, you know, waiting for him.**And there's a, you know, there was a lot of, um, code switching I had to play with to actually find these different aspects, these five different elements of who Aaron was. Physically, vocally, and emotionally there were so many different transformations that we had to do to really try and embody the worlds that he was living in. He had to be different people in these different worlds.***Be sure to watch Sony Pictures Television and ABC’s drama series, FOR LIFE, Tuesdays at 10/9 central on ABC.****Now back to Kwame’s story.** |
| **Host VO** | **Kwame, Wiley, and Ricky all served on death row before their sentences were commuted to life in prison.****As a teenager, Kwame was bored in school; he left high school after the 11th grade to get a certificate in welding.** **But in prison, education became his lifeline.** **He read countless books and earned degrees in cooking and typing. He also worked as an administrator in the prison school system.****Kwame's passion for education would be the catalyst for his personal transformation.** |
| **KA** | I had to learn the difference between being who I am and being what they wanted me to become.I can honestly say that I became an activist in that prison cell.I began to read books like, uh, *The Races* by Ruth Benedict, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. I was learning about living conditions and- and systems and governments and- and how these things come about.In George Jackson's book, *Soledad Brothers,* which is a compliance of letters that he wrote from his prison cell where he was, uh, killed in San Quentin.In one letter to a person that he addressed as “Z,” the letter Z, he said, “Dear Z, I want you to know that prison will either destroy you or bring out that which is the best in you.”And- and that is the most profoundly true statement that I have met, ran into or undertaken as a person since 1975, when prison became a door that I walked into.I would go on from reading those books and adjusting my mental state, to become the administrative clerk in the educational department for 21 years. And the reason why that was is because there was nothing like that. We made that happen. They had it, but you know, I was in a joint where they was stabbing people and killing them on a regular every day. Myself and a handful of guys actually begged the administration for a school. We were successful, we got not only high school, which you know, everybody needed to get a GED or something just about in there. We got college, we got vocational.The first degree I got because I was doing a life sentence would be vocational culinary arts. That's right, I can cook you something out of sight. I am the one who put in the entire educational process in its place, the way they have it right now in that particular joint.I was in my position in education in prison because I actually cared about those guys, because I wasn't a part of them. I knew I was in prison for something I didn't do, you know? And then I saw that the boys that was in prison, they needed help, they needed skills. Some of them didn't have life skills. Some of them didn’t have education. You know, I had to actually get my GED ‘cause they took me out for being so young I was getting ready to graduate. You see, I had to actually get mine from the state. I’m state raised like that too. But I went on, I went on, I went on and I taught others how to go on. |
| **Host VO** | **The prisons where Kwame spent the majority of his incarceration were located several hours from Cleveland by car making it difficult for his family to visit.** **As the years went by, the distance between Kwame and his loved ones weighed on him more and more heavily.** |
| **KA** | When we were in Cleveland, we didn't know that there would be a problem with visiting because it was just right downtown.But once we got miles and a few hours away in terms of driving a car for visitation, it was instantly a problem. And it was a problem that wouldn't get solved during my 28 years, and my brother's 39 years of actual incarceration. Simply because... yeah, we were poor. So, you know, nobody had a car. Nobody had a vehicle, you know, to... you know, everybody jump in and let's go see Wiley and Ronnie at the- at the prison.Nah, that didn't happen like that.And then slowly but surely as, uh, life would happen, you know, just when I was on death row in three years, six aunties passed away. It's just more and more. Now my mother's getting sicker and sicker, now my sister's starting to be like my mother was and now... you know? And... And I'm hearing it, you know?And I, you know, and in prison you really don't want to hear bad things because there’s not a ding dong thing you could do about it. But at the same token, you want to know what's going on.My absolute bottom, when I was in prison...the...15 years in, I went to the parole board, it was a Friday. And the- the parole board gave me a five year continuance. It was 1990 so five years, 1995 is when they told me to come back and I'll have another chance at freedom.I come out of the parole board and I walk past one of those telephones that you can use, but I decide as I look at the phone that I wasn't going to call my mother that day because it was going into the weekend. I didn't have nothing but really bad news, I just let it fly until Monday. Monday never came for her because she passed away Friday evening. And so now everything that I had in this world had just left. So in my way of thinking at that particular time, I said, you know what? I'm going to kill Ronnie Patrick Bridgeman today, and I became Kwame Kemawu Ajamu based on my mother's passing and how I knew I had to go forward in his world.Kwame means “Born on Saturday.” You see, my mother passed away on Friday. Kemawu, which is the name in the middle means “Silent Warrior.” And Ajamu means “He Fights For What He Wants.” |
| **Host VO** | **Thirteen years after Ronnie Bridgeman’s rebirth as Kwame Kemawu Ajamu, he finally won back his freedom.** **He was walking back from his job as an education department clerk when a notice on the prison bulletin board caught his attention.****The notice said that prisoners serving more than ten years may be eligible to have their cases reviewed for a special parole hearing.** **Kwame filled out a form and mailed it to the parole board. A week later, he was granted that special hearing.**  |
| **KA** | And a lot of people was telling me, “man, hell with that.” You know, that’s not- that’s nothing. You know. But sure as it rains and sure as the sun shines and sure as it snows and the seasons will come. When I opened that paper, it said that I had- was guaranteed a parole board hearing. And I went to the parole authority that next month and they gave me a parole based on outstanding programming.The first thing I thought about was my mother and how my mother died and this day had never came true in her life, you know? And then the next thought I had was my sister who had- had just passed away the year prior to that… that was my girl, you know? So... so that's where I was at with, with that. And thinking about my two favorite people in the whole wide world at that time... neither one of them would be there. Yeah, it kinda does something to me now.  |
| **Host VO** | **Kwame left prison as a new man.** **He had newfound freedom, a new sense of self, and a new name.** **And one morning, at a downtown bus stop he met the woman who would become his new family.** |
| **Lashawn Ajamu (LA)** | My name's LaShawn Ajamu and I am originally from Canton, Ohio. I had just moved from Canton to Cleveland. It was a cold morning and I was going to work. I missed the bus that I needed to be on, so I'm like looking around to see exactly where the bus was and all of a sudden it was like he just came out of nowhere and he was like,“What's your name?” And I'm like, ah, I don't know. And I told him my name and he was like, “well, what bus are you trying to catch?” And I was like, “I'm trying to catch the number five.” And he was like, “well, you're on the wrong side of the street. Let me walk you across.” He walked me across and I guess just so happened he was getting on that bus as well.And we got on the bus and we just started talking. |
| **KA** | I mentioned jail, you know, and I told her that I just got out of prison. “Yeah, right” You know, and to this day, she tells me that she thought that I was one of them guys in that office building right there where the bus stop was at, where we was at when she saw me. She didn’t think that I was in... you know, had been in prison, because of, you know, the aura of... of my character and everything.And the next thing I know we was courting and a year later she married me. |
| **LA** | I- I just felt like he could be trusted. And also my mom had told me, she said, “well, if you can live with a man for six months, then he's a winner. He's a keeper.” So I followed that advice of my mom and did that.My family never looked at him any differently because we have family members that go to jail. After getting to know him and his intentions, everyone in my family, I think they love him more than they love me. |
| **Host VO** | **About a year and a half after Kwame’s release from prison, he and LaShawn were married in a courthouse in downtown Cleveland.** |
| **LA** | I just wanted to go and do it and get it done and over with, not in a bad way, but I wanted to be his wife.And the judge asked Kwame, did he have anything to say? And at which he busted out and started crying. I still to this day, don't know why he started crying. |
| **KA** | For me, marrying LaShawn, the woman that I love, was everything. It was like... it was like going to the candy store when you're six years old and you just, your eyes light up because there's so many goodies around. Your hands get to sweating because you don’t know what to grab first.Oh man. Your little heart beating fast cause there's all for you. And I haven't, I haven't regretted one minute of that time that I've been with that woman since that day. |
| **Host VO** | **Kwame’s was beginning to find happiness in his new life with LaShawn but he was still not fully exonerated and was wracked with guilt that Wiley and Ricky were still in prison.****None of Kwame’s efforts to release them were successful. Furthermore, he still struggled with the trauma of his own incarceration.** |
| **KA** | I have episodes and I have moments that are... that are very, very shaken to my very soul.I could be eating, I could- I could be having fun, you know? And if I'm around my wife and family, then I'll excuse myself and go into the- the bathroom or whatever because it becomes embarrassing. You know, to be sitting there and tears streaming down your face.You know, “well, what's wrong, Kwame?” You know, nothing. You know, I have to say nothing. I got something in my eye, you know, I have to... you know, and that becomes embarrassing. You know, and it’s all the time, you see. |
| **LA** | I've learned to support his emotional state by just letting him express himself whenever he needs to. I've never tried to make him feel that he has to hide any of his feelings in front of me. I- I- I make him feel as safe as possible. I'm very pr- over protective, as he says sometimes, of his wellbeing. |
| **Host VO** | **In 2011, Kwame was a married man with a steady job, and he was about to take on yet another role.** **True to his new name, Kwame would become a warrior who fights for what he wants.****Kwame was paroled, but he still wasn’t exonerated for the crimes that led to his wrongful incarceration. And his brother Wiley and friend Ricky were still in prison.****Kwame was determined to clear his name and help the others. He approached a civil rights lawyer for advice, who connected him with local journalist, Kyle Swenson - the idea being that press coverage would draw public attention to the case*.*** |
| **KA** | Kyle Swenson is the hero in this story, actually. Kyle Swenson is the Clark Kent that went into the telephone booth and put on his glasses and brought this case to the forefront. |
| **KS** | When I wrote about this case I wrote two stories and then subsequently I expanded those into a book which was called *Good Kids, Bad City.*In 2011, I was about 25 years old so I was a fairly young reporter. I had been working in journalism for a couple years, but I was still pretty green. I hadn't really done any real substantive investigative reporting.I think people who get into this work hope that- that what we write and what we put out into the world will have some type of impact. So that was very much on my mind. I wanted to kind of swing for the fences.  |
| **KA** | He said he wanted- want to meet at the Starbucks.So I hopped on the freeway and I- I get down there and I got these boxes of, uh, transcripts and everything that has ever gone back and forth between me and my brother and my friend.He goes, “Kwame?” So I said, “Kyle?” And he goes, “yeah.”And I'm like, aw, man. He looked it like he was maybe 17, 18, you know? And a little scrawny kid, typical to today's type, you know, he didn't have no pen, no paper. He just had a little, one of them little things that you talk into in his hand, you know, and a cup of coffee. |
| **KS** | I think his idea of a newsman was kind of like a guy in a trench coat with a gravelly, smoke cured voice. Like a Peter Jennings type. And he sees me this, uh, 25 year old kid and you know ratty shoes and- and uh longish hair and I think he was probably a little unimpressed. The first article was really a kind of tag team effort between Kwame and I. I wrote it, but the reporting process was really us kind of working together.He would come to me and remember a name from the neighborhood and then I would go back and kind of begin to try to pull strings or or hunt them down. And so it was really a collaborative effort. Like I really did feel that we were in this together.We'd sit for hours just talking not necessarily even about this case, just about his life and other things and you know his view on the world. And I really began to see this is, you know, a real life that had been taken and- and really irreparably harmed by this situation. And I realized that there were two other guys who I- I didn't get to know because they were still in prison and I couldn't visit them.And so I really kind of hammered into me that this was- this was serious business, this was real. And it really kind of drove me to work harder and dig deeper and kind of just keep kicking at it and keep working.I realized that literally these three men, very young men at the time, had been sent to death row, you know to be executed on the basis of this one little boy's testimony. And when you read all that testimony it was completely all over the place. Some of it was physically impossible. The story changed from time to time, it was just all over the place. |
| **Host VO** | **The young journalist tried to interview Edward Vernon for his story, but the now middle-aged man refused to talk.****In June of 2011, Kyle Swenson’s article “What the Boy Saw” was published in Cleveland Scene Magazine.** **It highlighted Vernon’s inconsistent testimony as well as the absence of any other evidence linking the three men to the crimes that put them in prison for decades.****However, the article did not have the impact that Kyle and Kwame hoped for. At least, not at first.** |
| **KS** | We both had built up a lot of hope that this story would land and that judge's gavels would start flying and the jail doors would open and there would be some kind of public outrage about it.  |
| **KA** | What we expected didn't happen. The- the- the people in the communities didn't react to it. |
| **KS** | It really kind of broke my heart because I knew how much Kwame was hoping that this was going to help move, you know, move the needle forward on this. And I- I really felt like I had let him down. |
| **Host VO** | **Kyle and Kwame’s disappointment lingered for the next few years until early 2014, when Kyle received a call from an attorney at the Ohio Innocence Project.** **They knew of Kwame’s case, but Kyle’s article compelled them to pursue it.** **Within months, Edward Vernon had recanted the testimony that sent Kwame, Wiley, and Ricky to prison. Edward revealed that he had not seen the men commit the crime -- he had just repeated some gossip he heard on the way home from school.** **Kyle immediately called Kwame with the life-changing news.** |
| **KA** | He said, “man, Edward Vernon…” and his voice cracked. His voice cracked, like you know, like he was, he was crying on the other end and he said, “he, he recanted his story, man.” |
| **KS** | Kwame you know he was like, “oh that's beautiful, that's beautiful.” And then I'm just like you know super excited and I'm just yammering on and on about it. And then I realized that no one's really on the other end of the phone after a minute and I'm like, “are you there? Hello?” and then LaShawn comes on the phone and says, “He's so happy, you know, he can't- you know can't speak. He's just so so happy.” And for me that was probably one of the most amazing moments in my life. It was definitely one of the great honors of my life to be able to be the messenger and be able to tell him that- that this was almost over. |
| **Host VO** | **After Edward Vernon recanted, the Ohio Innocence Project filed petitions to grant Ricky Jackson and Wiley Bridgeman new trials.****In November of 2014, both men were exonerated after 39 years in prison. Kwame was overjoyed.** **Kwame Ajamu's exoneration hearing followed the next month.** |
| **KA** | The morning of my exoneration, which was December the 9th of 2014. Man, it was exciting.The judge herself came down off the bench and gave me a hug and whispered into my ear that, you know, “if you ever need anything, just, you know, come to my door.”I haven't used it yet, but I'm- I’m going to call her on that one of these days. One of these days I’m going to call her on that.I gave a thank you speech that was, I look back on, it was funny because all I was talking about was I want to thank my wife for staying with me and being by my side, helping me climb these hills. You know, nobody was there for me but her. She knew that, and you know I was innocent, she had strength in me, faith in me.Yeah, that was a… it was a remarkable day for- for me, it really was.Two or three days later, knock came on my door. It was a little bald headed white man by the name of Abraham Bonovitch, an activist.He said, “Kwame.” And I'm just looking at him because I didn't know him, but he recognized me from the news.He got to telling me about death penalty abolition, and I joined up. I joined up first with “OSE.” Ohioans to Stop Executions. And I was just a foot soldier, just a man in the ranks. A week later came Witness to Innocence, which is the only organization of its kind on the planet. I am now the chairman of this organization.The board, our membership completely consists of all death row exonerees. And we go all over the world fighting against capital punishment, mass incarceration, human trafficking. That's what I do on a daily basis. |
| **Host VO** | **Decades of wrongful imprisonment transformed Kwame Ajamu from a carefree teenager into a man of wisdom, focus, and purpose.****Kwame continues to work with Witness to Innocence in fighting the death penalty and educating the public about wrongful incarceration.** **He and LaShawn will celebrate their 16th wedding anniversary this August.** |
| **KA** | I went to prison, I was 17. I came out and I was 45. I'm content with that because the only thing left for me is a wife and a happy life, you know? And so, I want that more than I want anything, you know, and I got it and I'm good. |
| **Host VO** | **According to the National Registry of Exonerations - perjury and false accusations account for 58% of wrongful convictions in the United States.** |
| **HOST VO** | **Next time on FOR LIFE: THE PODCAST, we hear how the compassion one man received from others -- and the compassion he found for himself -- saved him from the depths of despair.** |
| **RN (TEASE)** | *“He wrote me a letter that he hadn’t received any Christmas cards that year and he was giving up. He wrote to me and told me, ‘I'm going to take my life.’ Sorry, sorry. Um, I was, um, my hands were tied. I was, I didn't know how to reach out to him. I couldn't call him. So I just wrote him another letter and pleaded to him not to take his life.”* |
| **Credits** | **FOR LIFE: THE PODCAST is produced by Treefort.** **Executive producers are Lisa Ammerman and Kelly Garner for Treefort. And Nicholas Austin and Nathan Staudinger for Sony Pictures Television.****Our producer is Tanayi Seabrook.****With additional production help from Jamie Tenenbaum, Tim Schauer, and June Rosen.****Thom Monahan is our senior audio engineer and sound supervisor. With production and editing by Jasper Leak and production assistance from Elijah Wells.** |
| **HOST VO** | **If you’ve enjoyed what you’ve heard, please subscribe, rate us and review us on Apple Podcasts. It really helps to raise awareness and get the word out so more people can hear these powerful stories.****The stories in this podcast are real.** **While the television series was inspired by my life, that story, including all characters, events, incidents, portrayed scenes, and dialogue is fictitious.** **And be sure to watch Sony Pictures Television and ABC’s drama series, FOR LIFE, Tuesdays at 10/9 central on ABC.** **I’m Isaac Wright Jr.**  |