

Center for Law and Social Policy
November 8, 2010
5:00 p.m. EST

Jodie Levin-Epstein: I'm talking today with Wes Moore, the author of *The Other Wes Moore*. Wes, could you just briefly tell us what your story's all about?

WES MOORE: Absolutely.

The story is basically about my life. And so it's an autobiographical look at my life and my journey, which has not always been easy, but through a lot of help and support I've been able to navigate my way through. But at the same time, it's about the life of another gentleman, a gentleman named Wes Moore who was living in the same neighborhood as I was living in, who was around the same age as I was, who also grew up in a single parent household, who grew up having academic and disciplinary troubles just like I did. But while I learned – I was heading off to England on a full scholarship – he received life in prison without the possibility of parole for the tragic murder of a police sergeant.

And so what the book is – the book really explains and helps to understand the life of these two boys

Jodie Levin-Epstein: Wes, a lot of our listeners are anti-poverty advocates. Some are inside government and advocates and others are outside government. Other listeners are researchers. How do you think these people who are listening today who are looking for strategies to address poverty can best use your book to either create a climate in their community or pursue particular strategies to reduce anti-poverty?

Wes Moore: I think one thing that people can do with the book, and people have done with the book is what the book does, it helps to illustrate the consequences of either our attention as a society, or apathy as a society.

I think poverty is one of these issues that is – that causes so many long term – both short and long term consequences in our society. I think there are so many who don't understand that. There are so many who have a certain ease in turning the other way when they see poverty. Or have a certain ease of neglecting the needs of those who happen to find themselves in situations of poverty. I think what the book does is help to show all of us that we cannot turn our backs - that we cannot just ignore these situations and ignore "those people." Because "those people" end up in situations that end up affecting all of us.

And so that's one thing I think that people can really use the book for, to help illustrate and show people that there's certain interconnectiveness of entire society, and a way that all of us need to get involved.

Jodie Levin-Epstein: Wes, you were describing the book at the outset as biographical; it's the story of your life and the other Wes Moore's life. Turning to policy though, how do you see policy flowing from the book? Is there a particular issue you could flag for the audience right now that you think they will be able to listen to and hear about more clearly if they read the story?

Wes Moore: There are. I think there are a few different policy issues that can really be derived from the story, but there are a couple in particular.

One, is on the issue of education reform and how exactly we're thinking about education, particularly in communities that have historically had such low rate of graduation and slow rates – such low rates of reading comprehension, in particular. And being able to show that for young people, their educational attainment should not be determined by their zip code. Their education attainment should not be determined by the family that they happen to be born into, or the community that they happen to live in. And so I think it's really important if we're – as we're talking about equality within our society, that education reform become part of that larger conversation.

I think the second point is this idea of employment and jobs, and particularly for those who are coming out of prison. Currently, right now, in this country we have a 70 percent recidivist rate. So 70 percent of people in prison, once they come out, will end up back inside of prison. So how we think about recidivism, how we think about

reintegration back into families, reintegration back into communities. And foster environments where if a person unfortunately ends up having to be involved in the criminal or juvenile justice system, that we can figure out ways to make it their last time of being involved in that type of system is, I think, better for not just them, but better for our society as a whole. Making sure that there's real rehabilitation that takes place, as well.

Jodie Levin-Epstein: Wes, one last question. You have a very potent tag line on your book, could you just state that for us?

Wes Moore: It says that the chilling truth is that his story could have been mine, and the tragedy is that my story could have been his.

Jodie Levin-Epstein: So you've talked a bunch to the other Wes Moore. And I can't ask you to speak for him, but do you think if he were to write this book telling his story and your story just as you have told yours and his, do you think he'd have something of a tag line just like that or would it be different?

Wes Moore: Well I think it might be slightly different. But I think one thing that Wes knows is this, and this is actually part of the motivation for writing it. You know when I talked to Wes about it, he said listen I've wasted every opportunity I've ever had in life, and I'm going to die in here.

I asked him about writing the book and what he thought and he said, if you can do something that can help people – help to show people the consequences for their decisions and also help to show people the neighborhoods that these decisions are being made in, then I think it's a worthwhile endeavor and I think you should do it.

I think one thing that Wes knows, and I'm not naïve. And I know I've been very blessed by the mother that I had and those family members who stuck up for and helped her. And for everybody – for the community members who were around and gave me support that I didn't realize that I had, or that I even needed at the time.

I do understand the benefits and the blessings and the luck that I've had in my life, but I also know this, is that had it not been for those things, had it not been for those people stepping up in ways that they didn't even have to. And had people been there to step up and give those type of supports to Wes, I know that both of our lives could have turned out very differently.

Jodie Levin-Epstein: I want to thank you very much, Wes Moore, for both writing your book and joining us today. Thanks very much. Bye bye, now.

Wes Moore: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Jodie Levin-Epstein: Yes. Bye, bye.
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