

The Bitter Southerner Podcast:

Can the South Be Redeemed?

Chuck Reece (00:00:04): Hello again my friends and welcome to the final episode of The Bitter Southerner Podcast, second season. We are, as always, co-produced with the good people of Georgia Public Broadcasting and for our grand finale this season, we're going to attempt to answer a question that to every true hearted southerner is among the most difficult ever. Can the South be redeemed?

(Rain FX and music up and udner).

Chuck Reece (00:00:40): There's a giant fly in the ointment of Southern culture, and for centuries, white southerners have tried to deny it or just ignore it, but it's deep in the source material of every little piece, every single artifact of our region's culture. And the fly I'm talking about of course, is slavery and the racial terror and oppression that followed it, and which sadly follow it still. Now I have to be open here, I'm a white guy. I'll be 60 years old, 11 months from now, but I've always known from the first minute I was exposed to it that racism is wrong. I was taught that all God's children were equal, and I was lucky enough to have a family that taught me that. But in general, why people in the South have been blind to the ways that we have benefited and continue to benefit from the violent lies of white supremacy.

Chuck Reece (00:01:40): And for some of my listeners, especially people of color, you may need to bear with me in this episode because I'm waking up to my own need to name these things, to hear and see the full truth of them and to erase what white kids of my generation were taught and replace that with the truth.

Chuck Reece (00:01:59):

(silence).

Chuck Reece (00:02:04): I want you to hear two sentences written in 1968 by one of my personal journalistic heroes, Ralph McGill. He published these words in the Atlanta Constitution the morning after the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. We've asked a friend whose voice recalls McGill's quite accurately to read them.

Ralph McGill (read by an actor) (00:02:26): At the moment, the trigger man fired, Martin Luther King was the free man. The white killer or killers, was a slave to his own sense of inferiority, a slave to hatred, a slave to all the bloody instincts that surge in a brain when a human being decides to become a beast.

Chuck Reece (00:02:57): McGill was the Pulitzer prize winning editor of the constitution and one of the few white Southern newspaper editors brave enough to tell his readers again and again for decades that supporting the civil rights movement was simply the right thing to do. That to love our fellows regardless of color, was the only way through. Now, McGill wrote those lines when I was seven years old and now I'm 59, and reading them today, they sound entirely too relevant because too many days bring us news of someone who has become a slave to hatred. Someone who has decided to become a beast. And it seems to me that if you have one ounce of human empathy in your veins, you cannot look at our legacy

of racial terror and oppression and simply say, "Well, that's past. Why can't we just move on?" I think it is literally impossible to do that and stay human. It can't be done. Not if you have listened to even one person whose family fell victim to the terror of white supremacy. Have you missed that opportunity to listen really closely? We're gonna fix that for you. These are the words of Doria D. Johnson whose great, great grandfather, Anthony Crawford was lynched in South Carolina in 1916.

Doria D. Johnson (00:04:30): He was accused of, um, committing a social infraction, which was cursing a white man over the price of some cotton seed.

Chuck Reece (00:04:37): Ms. Johnson spoke with Georgia Public Broadcasting in 2016, she died two years later. When we talked to her, she said her great, great, great grandfather's lynching tore her family and her whole community apart.

Doria D. Johnson (00:04:50): It had a devastating effect on my family and community so that, uh, most people wanted to leave. Those who, I was told those who had the means to do so did leave, and our family was actually ordered out of town.

Chuck Reece (00:05:04): She recalled hearing about the lynching from the time she was a child.

Doria D. Johnson (00:05:08): Very early, I was told the story about his lynching, um, probably in kindergarten, first grade when my school was integrated. Um, and my grandfather was concerned that I was befriending white, and he told me the story of grandpa Crawford and suggested that I not, um, trust white people because, you know, they'll kill us, and, and you know, it just was not a good thing to do.

(silence).

Doria D. Johnson (00:05:27): And so, at first grader, they can't really grasp the meaning of lynching, but I grew into the history, um, and the terror that it left on my family.

Chuck Reece (00:05:45): Okay, you've listened. So let's pause for just a couple of seconds to let you think, to let that sink in.

(silence).

Chuck Reece (00:06:01): See what I mean? That basic human impulse to empathize with others makes it impossible to say that Ms. Johnson's terror was in the past. And if you lack that basic impulse or are willing to put it aside, you are allowing yourself to become, as Mr. Miguel put it, a slave to hatred, a beast. You know, it's really enough to just make you throw your hands up and yell, "Can the South ever be redeemed?"

John Lewis (00:06:30): But the South can be redeemed, and the South we'll be redeemed.

Chuck Reece (00:06:38): That was civil rights icon and Congressman John Lewis. And I'll tell you what, if that man still has that much faith and that much optimism, then I reckon we can too. We're gonna hear more from Congressman Lewis on this episode of The Bitter Southerner Podcast as we look through the South past and try to conjure up a picture of what the redemption beyond it might actually look like. From a freedom rider's lifelong struggle against injustice to a story of how two families at opposite ends

of the civil rights struggle finally came together on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, today on The Bitter Southerner Podcast, can the South be redeemed?

Chuck Reece (00:07:31): On August 28th, 1963, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:07:39): So, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

Audience (00:07:48): Yeah.

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:07:50): It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream.

Audience (00:07:54): Yeah.

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:07:55): I have a dream-

Audience (00:07:56): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:07:58): ... that one day-

Audience (00:07:59): Yeah.

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:08:00): ... this nation will rise up, and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.

Chuck Reece (00:08:13): About a quarter million people convened that day on the National Mall in Washington as Dr. King delivered those words. One of them was 20 year old Sala Udin who grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His parents were from the South, but they'd moved up North during the great migration of black southerners who wanted to escape Jim Crow, which I think we ought to call by a more descriptive and accurate name, American apartheid. Mr Udin's mother often told him stories about her fears for black people in the South, but as Sala told an audience at the Moth Story SLAM in 2012, Dr. King's words that day moved him to pursue something greater.

Sala Udin (00:08:58): Mama's warnings were drowned out by the stories that were included in Dr. King's I have a dream speech in 1963. As I stand... stood there on the lawn of the Washington Mall in the hot August sun, sweat dripping down face, I stood there staring up at Dr. King, sometimes looking over his shoulder at this big giant statue of Abe Lincoln, the emancipator. And Dr. King told us stories of the trials and tribulations of the civil rights movement in the South and the arrests, and the beatings, and the bombings, and the little children of Birmingham who came forward in such large numbers that they filled the jail so bad that they couldn't get anybody else in the jails. And he told us the bravery of the civil rights workers and he issued a call for support of the civil rights movement. And I said, at that moment, "I wanna be a freedom rider. I wanna join his movement." Now, I need this, to tell you a little bit about what freedom riders were and what they did because they lived very dangerous lives. Freedom riders, we took carloads of sharecroppers and farmers up to the County seat every day to the courthouse to register to vote. We would take children to the white, all white elementary school to desegregate the elementary school. Or we'd take high school students and college students to the all white lunch

counter at the five and 10 downtown. And my favorite was taking black worshipers to the all white church on Sunday morning to pray. We made white folks so angry. Their whole world was being turned upside down. They was mad enough to kill, literally. And they did many of us. And so it was necessary for freedom riders to have rules of how to stay alive as a freedom rider in Mississippi. One, don't let your car run out of gas. Keep a tank full of gas. Have four good tires on the ground. Keep your car tuned up and your papers straight, your driver's license, your registration. Have everything kept in order. Don't let the highway patrol or the KU Klux Klan catch you broke down on the side of the road. And one more important rule, don't ride with white folks and black folks in the same car. It's a dead giveaway that you're freedom riders. And especially, don't have a black man behind the wheel with a white woman in the front seat. If a white woman just had to ride in the car with a black man, she had to beat in the backseat like driving Miss Daisy. So I was particularly amused by the question that Roberta came from around the corner to ask. Roberta was a white freedom rider from Chicago. She came limping around the corner to ask me to please take her with me to Mt. Beulah. And Mt Beulah is an important weekend retreat for freedom riders. We loved Mt. Beulah. We needed Mt. Beulah. We looked forward to the weekend where we can get to the safe haven of Mt. Beulah. And Roberta was asking me to take her with me to Mt. Beulah. It's about a two hour drive. "Roberta, why don't you ride with some of the white workers?" "Everybody's gone. You're the last person leaving the Delta going to Mt. Beulah, and I've gotta get to Mt. Beulah. I've got people coming who're gonna meet me there, please take me with you." I often thought back, why did I decide to let Roberta ride with me? Was it 'cause she begged and pleaded so hard? Was it because she had people coming to meet her? Was it because she refused to insult me by riding in the backseat? I said, "Hell, insult me." Or was it because she had polio, and she walked around on these two crutches, and she was willing to leave her home in Chicago to come and make a sacrifice for the movement in Mississippi? And so she took a chance on us. So I figured, "Well, I guess I'll take a chance on Roberta. Come on, get in the front seat." And we start out for Mt. Beulah. It's about to get dark. We goin' down Highway 51. Not much traffic, we're driving along, it's getting darker. Traffic is getting a little heavier, and I figured, "Well, it's the weekend, traffic's normally heavy." Then as we go a little further, the traffic is getting heavier and it starts to slow down, and I figure, "Maybe there's an accident up ahead." And then I see it. Oh God, the flashing blue lights of the Mississippi Highway Patrol. It's a Mississippi Highway Patrol roadblock and it's too late to turn around and by now, police officers are waving us on, "Come on through." And they're looking down inside the car, and they see me behind the wheel, and Roberta sitting beside me. And they're talking on the radios and waving me through. So by the time we get to the roadblock, they pull me off to the side of the road. They pull me out of the car, take me down over a ravine, and they start whipping me, it seemed like 15, 20 minutes, it felt like 15 to 20 days. They made my mother's prediction come true. They whip me to within an inch of my life. I thought I was going to jail when the police officer made me march towards the jail house at gun point. He made me go past the jail, and the only thing behind the jail was the woods. When I got to the edge of the woods, I slowed down and he said, "Move. Keep walking." And I started walking into the woods. I'm looking, I can see the traffic lights 100 feet, 200 feet, "Keep walking," 300 feet. I can't see the traffic lights no more. "Stop." I can feel the barrel of his gun against my head. He says, "You ain't going to say yes sir, is your nigger?" "Bang." My head exploded, I dropped down on my knees, blood running down my shirt, and I fell over on the ground, and I said to myself, "Did he shoot me in the head? Am I dead? Am I dead?" "Get up nigger, I didn't shoot you. I just banged you upside the head with the button of my gun. And it went off. But if you don't get your ass up off that ground, I'm gonna shoot you for real." And I got up. "Get on back over to the jail." And I started walking back out of the woods and I'm wondering, "Why didn't he shoot me?" Maybe it was because he could tell that I might've said yes sir, if I wasn't so completely wrapped in fear. So we're back in the jail house, and I'm looking in this mirror, at this swollen disfigured face, and I say, "I don't know why they didn't kill me, but they should have because now I'm committed. I'm clear. I will never stop fighting racism. I will fight

racism and injustice for the rest of my life. For the rest of my life, I'm going to be a freedom rider."
Thank you.

(clapping)

Chuck Reece (00:20:27): That was Sala Udin, a freedom rider and community organizer who also served on the Pittsburgh City Council for more than a decade. We're extraordinarily grateful to the good folks at the Moth Radio Hour of whom we are huge fans for allowing us to use Mr. Udin's story. We've posted his entire Moth story on our website.

(silence).

Chuck Reece (00:20:59): In the 1960s, the extremes looked like this. You had freedom riders like Sala Udin at one pole, and you had those who had become BESE at the other pole, but in the middle there were some white people, and in particular clergy, religious leaders who wanted to resist that urge to become BESE, but they still pushed back against the civil rights movements' marches, and straight actions. These were the people that Dr. King addressed his letter from the Birmingham jail to.

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:21:33): I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the negroes' great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the white citizens' counselor or the KU Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice.

Chuck Reece (00:21:55): Dr. King spoke directly to the imperative of standing for fellow humans freedom even when it ain't convenient.

Martin Luther King Jr. (00:22:02): Shallow understanding from people of Goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Chuck Reece (00:22:27): The month Dr. King penned that letter from the Birmingham jail, one of the South's most important journalists was born. John Archibald, [inaudible 00:22:36], prize winning columnist with the Alabama Media Group. For years, he's challenged Alabamians to come to terms with the racism that's baked into their state's history and even into their constitution. After winning the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Commentary, John wrote, and I quote, "Alabama is a place I love with all my being. It's a place that needs prodding to be welcoming and gracious to all. That I have a voice here is astonishing and rewarding in ways I can never explain."

Chuck Reece (00:23:09): And the product of all those columns and all of his research will come out in a book in May, 2020, and it's called Shaking the Gates of Hell. It digs deeply into the stories of those folks who stayed in the middle back in the 1960s. And John believes today that for the South to be redeemed, white southerners need to overcome what he calls the great silence that exists in many of our lives.

John Archibald (00:23:35): My dad was a Methodist preacher and a good man who, um, taught me everything that I believe in now, and I think he always stood for right. But, I, I was born in, in April of '63 in Birmingham in the same moment in time when Martin Luther King was in jail, writing the letter from the Birmingham jail, which excoriated the white church for its silence. In that time, I never really thought to ask, "Dad, you know, what were you saying at this time?" 'Cause I assumed he was saying the right

things. And uh, and then when he died, all of his sermons were left in a basement and I finally read them.

(silence).

John Archibald (00:24:18): And you know, in, in ways it was very disappointing, and it came to me to kind of understand what this great silence, what it means. Is it possible to be a good person to stand for all the right things if you don't say the things that need to be said?

Chuck Reece (00:24:35): To put it in Ralph McGill's terms, John is writing about that choice between being human or becoming a beast.

John Archibald (00:24:44): If you don't know w- what... the triumphs of the past, you don't know what we can become tomorrow. If you don't know the sins of the past, you don't know what we're capable of, you know, today. So, I think it's really important to get people to look back. I'm coming from a place of love, where that love of what i- it means to be Southern level, what it means to be Alabamian, a Georgian, a Mississippian, whatever, you know, is apparent there, while at the same time saying, "You know, if you love something, you can't let it go to hell."

Chuck Reece (00:25:14): John's business, three times a week in his column, is to engage in that wrestling match. And he still sees a good mini-beast among those who respond to what he writes, but he sees more people who want to travel a way of peace. And that's why he retains his own faith and optimism.

John Archibald (00:25:35): If I come to believe that people aren't inherently good, then there's no more point in doing it. And uh, and I still believe, I still believe they are, although some days I have to tell myself that more than others.

Chuck Reece (00:25:49): Some days, I have to do that too. Our thanks to John Archibald, and just to add, Congressman John Lewis and Peggy Wallace Kennedy, daughter of the late Alabama Governor George Wallace on their road to redemption. You're listening to The Bitter Southerner Podcast from Georgia Public Broadcasting and the Bitter Southerner Magazine.

(silence).

Chuck Reece (00:26:32): Welcome back to The Bitter Southerner Podcast. Our next guest is someone who did exactly what John Archibald described, someone who tried to break that great silence. And her name is Peggy Wallace Kennedy. She's the daughter of George Wallace, who was the longest serving governor in Alabama's history, and one of the most notorious segregationists in America. She documents her personal journey in a new book called The Broken Road, and in it she writes about her dad's first inaugural address on January 14th, 1963 when he made this commitment.

George Wallace (00:27:10): In the name of the greatest people that have ever [inaudible 00:27:14], I draw the line in the dust, and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever."

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:27:30): In his inaugural address, when he said, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever," I'm standing to his left and I heard the crowd just roar and cheer, and I remember thinking, I was 12 years old, "They really like what he just said. I don't know what he said, but they really liked that."

Chuck Reece (00:27:56): Five months later, George Wallace made his infamous stand in the schoolhouse door.

George Wallace (00:28:07): I stand here today as governor of this Southern State, and refuse to willingly submit the illegal use of [inaudible 00:28:08], of power by the central government.

Chuck Reece (00:28:09): He aimed to block Vivian Malone and James Hood, the first two African American students ever admitted to the university of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

George Wallace (00:28:17): Among those power, so reserved and claimed is a right of state authority in the operation of the public schools, colleges and universities.

Chuck Reece (00:28:23): At that point, Peggy was 13 years old, and by then she says she knew that what her dad was doing was wrong.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:28:32): In my heart, I felt that was wrong, and I didn't wanna tell him, you know, I didn't wanna... I mean, I really didn't have a voice 'cause I wa- I, I lived in a political family and uh, daddy was gone a lot, and, uh, um... So it was, and I thought that was the norm really. I thought if I live that way, but... and that, that was normal for us and we did- but we didn't talk about politics at home. So that's when [inaudible 00:29:03], started.

Chuck Reece (00:29:04): Mm-hmm (affirmative). What did you find yourself having to do to sort of live with that?

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:29:10): Well, I found myself, um, having to say no, he is not a racist, he's a segregationist. So, uh, even though, uh, later on when I got older and everything, I realized, you know, I, I came to understand that in '62, he, he did have to run, uh, as a racist and a segregationist to win in '62.

Chuck Reece (00:29:37): In Alabama.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:29:39): Yes. Because that's, uh, what he wanted. He wanted to win that governorship more than anything in the world, and that was the way he had to do it. Um, so I understand that now. Um, so it wa- it was, it was difficult, And I, at at 13, I didn't want to say anything to, to him, um, 'cause we were very close and loved each other very much. And um, I thought he might be disappointed in me or, uh, 13 is a ha-, hard age.

Chuck Reece (00:30:16): Yeah, it is. And, you know, I, I found it very interesting that you write in the book that, that you believe that if your father could read this book, he would tell you he was proud of you.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:30:29): Yes. And I know, I know he would be. And I-

Chuck Reece (00:30:34): Why, why do you think he would be?

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:30:37): I just know, I just know my da- my father-

Chuck Reece (00:30:39): Yeah.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:30:39): ... I just know he would be, and John Lewis told me he would be.

Chuck Reece (00:30:44): Well, I... you know, i- it's so interesting because, you know, you're, you write very eloquently in the... about this book that, you know... first of all, you're, you, you do a great job of making the point of how your father's ambition was very singular from very early in his life. He wanted to be the governor of Alabama.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:31:05): Yes.

Chuck Reece (00:31:05): That was his goal.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:31:06): Yes.

Chuck Reece (00:31:07): And, you know, along the way, when he was a circuit judge, you know, he was known as fair to people regardless of race.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:31:16): Yes.

Chuck Reece (00:31:16): Uh, and you know, and one of the things that was most difficult for me as a child growing up, I'm just a little more than 10 years younger than you. And, uh, when you get old enough to see those contradictions that you always saw in the South-

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:31:37): Yes.

Chuck Reece (00:31:37): ... back then, i- i- it was very confusing for me personally. It felt like to me back in those days that there was a lot being hidden from us and not talked about.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:31:49): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (00:31:51): And I, I, I got to figure, you must've felt that way too, that there were things that you couldn't talk about and things that you could talk about.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:31:58): Within our family?

Chuck Reece (00:32:00): Well, both within the family and beyond. I'm curious about both.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:32:04): Well, um, I know when the 16th Street Baptist church was bombed-

Chuck Reece (00:32:09): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:32:10): I mean, you know, mother and I talked about that-

Chuck Reece (00:32:13): Right.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:32:14): ... and, um, we were very, you know, we were heartbroken for the, those chi-

Chuck Reece (00:32:19): For those little girls .

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:32:19): .. for those children, yes. Those girls and, and the two boys at night. Um, I, I, I guess [inaudible 00:32:31], brought it up, it just was, um, uh... Daddy was in and out and just was... There's... This was an opportunity to, um, say, um, "Can you sit down for a (laughing), minute? I'm, um, I'm gonna tell you my opinion on something." It just wasn't, wasn't like that. And I don't think my mother never really had... She never really expressed her opinion on, on those sorts of things either to us-

Chuck Reece (00:33:03): Hmm.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:33:04): ... because, um, I really think looking back on it, she did try to shelter us. Um, and, and then I was telling somebody, if you watch the '63 inaugural address-

Chuck Reece (00:33:20): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:33:22): ... after my father says, um, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever," when the clapping begins, my mother puts her hand up and coughs.

Chuck Reece (00:33:34): Hmm.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:33:34): She does not clap. But later on, uh, as first lady, she did, you know, go... was asked if she went along with his um, um, stand and, and she said yes.

Chuck Reece (00:33:49): Well, you know, I think in those days Southern women were too frequently expected-

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:33:56): Mm-hmm (affirmative), yes.

Chuck Reece (00:33:57): ... to just toe the line.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:33:58): Yes. But she did not clap. (laughs). She coughed.

Chuck Reece (00:34:04): I love, I love to think about that that mi- that might've been her little way of-

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:34:09): Yes.

Chuck Reece (00:34:09): ... of showing her disagreement why, why-

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:34:11): Yes, like, like she did later on. Yes. (laughs).

Chuck Reece (00:34:16): And, and, you know, a lot has been talked about how late in his life your father began to try to make amends-

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:34:24): Yes.

Chuck Reece (00:34:25): ... for some of the things that he had done, and shortly before your father died, he was quoted as saying, "I don't hate blacks. The day I said segregation forever, I never said a thing that would upset about black person unless it was segregation. I never made fun of 'em about inequality and all that kind of stuff. But my vehemence was against the federal government folks. I didn't make people get mad against black people, I made them get mad against the court." And in that, to be honest, what I hear is that he still had some reluctance and... to admit that what... the things he had done were wrong.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:35:05): Right.

Chuck Reece (00:35:06): You know, because I don't, I don't believe that any modern African-American person in the South would allow him to draw a line that fine between the supportive segregation-

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:35:17): Yeah.

Chuck Reece (00:35:17): ... and, and hatred for people of other races. I think most people today think those things go hand in it.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:35:24): Yeah. And, you know, as I said, um, in '62, he would have done anything to win that race.

Chuck Reece (00:35:33): Well, you know, and that's the kind of political ambition that certain people have.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:35:37): That's right.

Chuck Reece (00:35:37): And there are quite a few people we could talk about in, in, in our modern life right now who, who're like that.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:35:45): But, but, my father had the capacity to change. Some people do not have the capacity to change.

Chuck Reece (00:35:59): In 1996 a couple of years before her father George's death, Peggy and her husband, Mark Kennedy, who at the time was a justice on the Alabama Supreme Court, took their young son Burns to the King Center in Atlanta. One of the exhibits they came across featured a photo of Burns's grandfather George Wallace.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:36:19): And we came around the corner, and the exhibits were uh, the Edmund Pettus bridge fire hoses and dogs in Birmingham, and George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door, Burns was about eight years old, and he had a look of sadness on his face and he looked up at me and he said, "Why did Popo do those things to other people?" And it was a question that literally changed my life. I held him really close and I said, "Popo never told me why he did those

things to other people, but I know he was wrong. So maybe it will have to be up to you and me to help make things right."

Chuck Reece (00:37:14): Peggy Wallace Kennedy began walking her own road of redemption that day. 12 years later, the road took her to Selma, Alabama where she marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Congressman John Lewis following the first inauguration of president Obama. And that was the same bridge where her father's state troopers had fractured Louis' skull with their billy clubs in 1965.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:37:39): I had the opportunity to go to Selma, Alabama in 2009 to um, cross the bridge-

Chuck Reece (00:37:48): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:37:49): ... uh, with John Lewis, and, um, I'd never, I'd never met Congressman Lewis, but, um, we held hands and crossed the bridge and he just... he showed me the unconditional love and reconciliation, and forgiveness can heal a human heart.

Chuck Reece (00:38:11): Right. On this episode, we've also got Congressman John Lewis, you know, who we, we've talked about a little bit earlier. I asked him to talk about what it meant to him to walk across that bridge with you hand in hand on that day. Uh, and if you don't mind, I wanna, I wanna play what he said to me.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:38:35): Okay.

John Lewis (00:38:36): To walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, many years later, after Bloody Sunday with Governor Wallace's daughter meant so much, not just to me, but to hundreds and thousands of people all across the South and all across America. We walked hand in hand and the act made me cry and it, it, it made me cry. It's the ability and the capacity of people who can come together as brothers and sisters.

Chuck Reece (00:39:15): How does that make you feel?

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:39:16): Um, I love John Lewis and everything, he is [inaudible 00:39:23]. He calls me sister and I call him brother. We grew up 38 miles from each other, but we were oceans, our lives were oceans apart. When I crossed that bridge with him, it was a, a turning point in my life.

Chuck Reece (00:39:44): Yeah.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:39:45): Yes. And he showed me that unconditional love and reconciliation and forgiveness can heal a human heart, pour something into you that's good and real. And he was good and real to me. He pulled me over to the side and looked over into the water, then he said, "Now, sister, we need to move on." That to me meant we move forward.

Chuck Reece (00:40:19): Right.

Peggy Wallace Kennedy (00:40:21): He's always saying, "We w- we can't go back. We have to move forward."

Chuck Reece (00:40:26): Unconditional love can change the human heart. It's the same message that I'd heard when I interviewed John Lewis in November. About a month after he and I talked, Congressman Lewis announced that he had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer, and we hope we will use the method of your choice to send a little healing vibe his way, but I can tell you this, if faith, perseverance, and optimism help the body heal, Congressman Lewis is well equipped for his fight with cancer because in our conversation, what shook me in a way I never expected was his optimism, his absolute dedication to never stop walking, what he calls the way of love and the way of peace. And I think it's important for us, before y'all listen to our conversation, to look back at what John Lewis went through, which makes that kind of optimism, at least in my eyes, almost unbelievable. Let's go back to 1963 when at the age of 23 years old, John Lewis was the youngest speaker at that March on Washington.

John Lewis (00:41:31): We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. And then you holler, "Be patient." How long can we be patient? We want our freedom and we want it now. We do not want to go to jail. But we will go to jail if this is the price we must pay for love, brotherhood, and true peace.

Chuck Reece (00:42:02): That speech was one of many examples in John Lewis' his life of him getting in what he calls good trouble. Two years after the March on Washington, he joined some 600 people who marched 54 miles from Selma, Alabama to the State Capitol in Montgomery. Their march was made to honor Jimmy Lee Jackson, a black man who had been shot to death by an Alabama state trooper during the civil rights demonstration. And by the time they crossed the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, they were met by state troopers.

STATE TROOPER (00:42:35): "It will be detrimental to your safety to continue this march, and I am saying this is an unlawful assembly--you are ordered to disperse! Go home or go to your church. This march will not continue."

Chuck Reece (00:42:49): And this is the sound of what John Lewis and hundreds of others went through when they marched across the Edmund Pettus bridge on what became known later as Bloody Sunday. A few months after a state trooper cracked Lewis his skull that day he appeared at the White House for the signing of the voting Rights Act. How's that for justice? Some 30 years later, he was elected to Congress where he steadfastly has stood up both in the well of the house chamber and on the streets of his Atlanta District against any threat to the idea that all of us are created and should be treated equally. And a few years ago he even became a bestselling prize winning graphic novelist. He co-wrote the National Book Award winning March series with his longtime congressional staffer Andrew Aydin, and they both believed that their comic books are the next step in the March that Louis has been on his entire life.

Andrew Aydin (00:44:02): I'm hearing this is uh, Andrew Aydin.

Chuck Reece (00:44:04): Hi Andrew. How are you?

Andrew Aydin (00:44:06): Good. How you doing, sir?

Chuck Reece (00:44:07): I'm good. How are you, Congressman Lewis?

John Lewis (00:44:09): I'm doing very well, sir. How are you?

Chuck Reece (00:44:11): I'm doing very well. Uh, you know, I, I moved from the city of Atlanta out to Clarkston three years ago-

John Lewis (00:44:19): Really?

Chuck Reece (00:44:19): ... and the single thing that made me saddest was no longer having you as my representative.

John Lewis (00:44:24): Oh, so sorry.

Chuck Reece (00:44:25): (laughs).

John Lewis (00:44:25): Well, I can still represent you.

Chuck Reece (00:44:29): He does, and millions others, I expect. Lewis sees the comic books that he's created with Andrew as a new way to keep the movement towards what's right, toward justice and peace going into 21st century. And I know that for me, reading March, which Chronicles John Lewis's experiences during the civil rights movement put me into the movement in a way that no regular book or film could. And it's a welcome thing to know that March is now taught in classrooms all over the country. This is John Lewis and Andrew Aydin talking about what they believe March has accomplished and their plans for another series.

John Lewis (00:45:07): Well, first of all, it was a dream of A- Andrew, uh, that we should do a, uh, a book.

Chuck Reece (00:45:16): Right.

John Lewis (00:45:17): Um, I, I remember when I was very young and had all of my hair a few pounds lighter-

Chuck Reece (00:45:23): (laughs).

John Lewis (00:45:24): ... growing up, uh, reading a comic book edit by Martin Luther King Jr. called Mondo's King Jr. that told the story of the civil rights movement, of the Montgomery struggle to end segregation, um, public transportation in the city of Montgomery.

Chuck Reece (00:45:47): Right?

John Lewis (00:45:49): And that little book, um, inspired me and hundreds and thousands and millions of young people all over America, but also around the world. It taught us a way of peace, the way of love, to philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. And, I remember when I first met Rosa Parks in, in 1957 and meeting Dr. King in 1958, and later going off to school to study the philosophy of nonviolence, the way of peace, the way of love, I was standing for the ministry.

Chuck Reece (00:46:33): Right?

John Lewis (00:46:33): And this little book helped to free me and make me brave and bold and taught me how to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. When I was growing up in rural Alabama and I've asked my mother, my father, my grandparents, my great grandparents, why this [inaudible 00:46:55], "He was a boy, that's the way it is, don't get in a way, don't get in trouble."

Chuck Reece (00:47:00): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John Lewis (00:47:02): But Dr. King book, his words, and the action, uh, of Rosa Parks inspired me to get in trouble. And Andrew with his smart, brilliant staff-

Chuck Reece (00:47:16): (laughs).

John Lewis (00:47:18): ... kept saying, "Congressmen, uh, you should write a book. I guess we refer to it as a comic book."

Andrew Aydin (00:47:24): "You should write a comic book, and we'll write a comic book."

John Lewis (00:47:27): Uh, I remember reading the comic paper, uh, when I was growing up, uh, I guess we called it the funny paper.

Chuck Reece (00:47:35): Yeah. The funny pages.

John Lewis (00:47:36): But I never really, uh, considered, uh, being an author or doing anything like that. But Andrew was a master and he's still today a master at being able to write, to tell this story, and so I'm so grateful for him getting me hop on comic books.

Chuck Reece (00:48:01): March did something different for me than any other history book or story about the movement that it had. It, it actually put me in the movement. It, it allowed me to feel like... To, to, to feel kind of like what it was like as it happened. Was, was that part of y'all's intention in, in doing this?

Andrew Aydin (00:48:25): Yeah, absolutely. I think when we thought about the benefits of doing a comic book, that was one of the most, uh, important, um, abilities that it gave us, was to put you inside of it. Documentary looks at it from the third person, even a, um, film kind of can't put you in it the way that, uh, a graphic novel can. And for us, so much of those stories had, had been lost. I grew up in Atlanta, the Congressman was my Congressman since I was three years old.

Chuck Reece (00:48:56): (laughs).

Andrew Aydin (00:48:57): And yet growing up in Atlanta, going to Atlanta public schools, I had never heard the stories of Snick. I'd never heard the stories of young people, and nobody had told me how much power young people have. And, working for the Congressman, working on that campaign within the first summer and hearing those stories for the first time I was, I was, I was frustrated. I was like, "Why did... Why has no one told me this? Why has no one taught me this version of history?" Because he is such a powerful storyteller. He's so gifted just with the way he can make you feel in a room. And I

wanted to find a way to put that down on pa- on, on, on the page. And when we look back on it now, um, you know, to your question about w- what has March accomplished, it's almost unreal to think that in six years since we put out the first volume, three years since we came out with a third one, March is now the second most taught graphic novel in America.

Chuck Reece (00:49:58): Really?

Andrew Aydin (00:49:59): Uh, yeah, so the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund did a study and they did a survey of all the schools, um, which, which ones were using graphic novels, what they were using, number one is Mouse, which came out in 1992 and won a Pulitzer prize. And the next one is March.

Chuck Reece (00:50:17): Well it, it really did have a big impact on me and obviously it's having a, a big impact on a lot of other people and has, and you know, based on what you've just told me about how it's being taught in the schools, I expect it will continue to have a, a, a, a great impact for many years on, on students all over the country. And that's a wonderful thing, and I, you know, I've heard that, that y'all are working on another graphic novel.

Andrew Aydin (00:50:47): Yeah. It's called Run. Um, it's actually gonna be more than one book. Um, we'll have some specific, uh, to, to announce at some point, but, um, idea is that first you March and then you run.

Chuck Reece (00:50:59): Wow.

Andrew Aydin (00:50:59): Um, John Lewis is such a powerful example of how, um, public service comes from civic activism. And, I think, you know, March if anything, it was trying to carry on the work of Martin Luther King and the Montgomery story and how Martin Luther King used that to inspire a generation of young activists. And those activists became the people leading. Snick and Core and COFO and all these important organizations from the movement, and then March becomes this, uh, lightning rod of inspiration for other young people now that we're seeing organizing on a, a scale that we've been waiting for, right? Whether it's the students out of Parkland or students all over the country organizing around climate change, it's a role model for them. John Lewis' example is a role model for them, but we're reaching an inflection point where young people have to not only be activists, but we need them in government.

Chuck Reece (00:51:49): Yeah.

Andrew Aydin (00:51:49): We need them running for office. We need them making that next step that John Lewis made. And so, um, the idea behind Run is that it will inspire these young people to understand how it was that John Lewis transitioned from young, uh, civic activist, um, into public service and hopefully inspire them to run in greater numbers and to be the public servants that we need to redeem the soul of America.

Chuck Reece (00:52:17): Yeah. And, you know, and, and redemption is really at the core of the episode of our podcast that I'm interviewing you guys for. You know, so I'd like to ask you, Congressman Lewis the question that's at the heart of this episode, can the South ever be redeemed from its history of slavery and white supremacy and oppression?

John Lewis (00:52:48): Well, the South can be redeemed, and the South will be redeemed. When you're travel through the South today, you see an unbelievable place in the making. People are moving from the old ways of doing things to a new way. People are believing a new, and it's amazing to me when I go back to rural Alabama where I grew up, or travel through the State of Georgia, other parts in the South, I feel like we're more than lucky. We are blessed to see all of these smart young people on the move and many of the people that, that are not so young-

Chuck Reece (00:53:35): Right.

John Lewis (00:53:36): ... they're moving with change. They want to help the South redeem. They want to make the South a better place, and to ensure they will make our nation and our world a better place. The people in the South will not give up. They will not give in, they will not give out, until we have transformed our region, made it a place for everybody, not just for a few but for everybody. And today you see this unbelievable migration back to many place of the Deep South. It a good thing.

Chuck Reece (00:54:16): Yes.

John Lewis (00:54:16): And, you know, we... As we learned from our past, and we will make a future much better for all of our citizens, but no one is left out or left behind because of their race and their color.

Chuck Reece (00:54:35): As we work toward that day when our region might actually reach a true reconciliation, how far will all our human hearts I have to go?

John Lewis (00:54:49): Well, we have a distance still to travel, but I do- I don't think it's gonna be that much of a distance in weeks and months and years to come, and maybe what happened in Selma, what happened in Birmingham, um, or in Montgomery will be a le- lesson, not just for the people of America, but for the people of the world.

Chuck Reece (00:55:19): Once again I pray you're right. Go ahead, Andrew. I'm sorry I interrupted you.

Andrew Aydin (00:55:24): No, that's okay. I, I, I think there's an important part too about your own role. We often focus on Selma. We focus on bloody Sunday, but what you and your colleagues were able to do with the creation of Snick and the way, especially early stage Snick empowered young people, not just in their own communities, but on the national stage to push for legislation, um, and fundamental shifts in the way America works, the dividends, the ripples, the effects of that are what enabled us to get to this point where redemption could be possible. Because without empowering the young people to remake the world, we would be stuck in a perpetual loop of what people used to think it should be. By creating Snick, by the efforts of the freedom riders, and the sit in movement and, and the radicalism that you brought to the, to the speech at the March on Washington, you empowered a group of young people and, and, uh, gen- and generations of young people to say, "This isn't the way it has to be, we can do better." And then showed them how to make that real, to make that change happen on a national scale.

John Lewis (00:56:42): Andrew, we can do better and we will do better because there's young people today who have fallen love with March. People all over America and around the world are reading the graphic novel, book one, book two and book three.

Andrew Aydin (00:57:06): But even, even that, I have to be grateful for you because when we started, when we had this idea, nobody thought it was dignified for a Congressman to write a comic book. Comics were not what they were. Do you remember when you went to Dragon Con with me for the first time? And we sat down and had lunch in the lobby of the Hyatt, and your eyes were like saucers. You kept saying, uh, "It's uh, happening," and-

John Lewis (00:57:35): It wasn't happening.

Andrew Aydin (00:57:36): (laughing), It wasn't.

John Lewis (00:57:36): (laughs).

Andrew Aydin (00:57:39): And, and, and that it, that's it. Right? Like your generation was so willing to change, was willing to embrace new things. Now Snick had used comics in the 60s and Dr. King had used it in the 50s but for you, with your national platform, being a sitting Congressman, it was a huge development in how we tell stories, and what is acceptable, what this generation is allowed to accept. And now, you see graphic novels for young adults is one of the fastest growing parts in all publishing. But you had the courage to say yes to a 23 year old kid with a wild idea, and then follow with him, 'cause it took us five years from that idea to actually getting it out there. And I know it wasn't easy. I know a lot of folks were sorta, you know, they wonder like, "What are you thinking going along with that kid?" And now everyone thinks it's self evident but it took real courage to embark on that. And I think you all the while kept in mind what it was we were ultimately trying to do, which was to teach this generation about their power and how you are able to recognize it for your generation, and to address this problem that had become systemic, which is that we weren't teaching the civil rights movement, we weren't teaching the history of the South, we were glossing over it, and we were in many ways taking away the brilliance of some of your closest friends.

John Lewis (00:59:02): Well, I'm glad and thankful that I went along with you.

Andrew Aydin (00:59:06): I am too. I appreciate it-

John Lewis (00:59:08): Thank you.

Andrew Aydin (00:59:08): ... so much. It changed my life, sir. I can't imagine what it would've been like without you.

John Lewis (00:59:14): That's...

Chuck Reece (00:59:14): All right, y- y- y- you know what, gentlemen? I think I feel more hopeful in this moment than I have throughout this entire year. And I appreciate (laughing), y'all having that conversation on our show. Well, Congressman Lewis, I, I know our time is limited and I've, I've only got one more question for you, and, uh, I think it very much has to do with the sort of perseverance that you were just talking about. Uh, what do you hope your work will leave behind for all the rest of us Southerners to take farther down the road?

John Lewis (00:59:53): It is my hope and, and my prayer, that what I've tried to do will inspire another generation of young people and people not so young to stand up, to speak up and to speak out. To be

brave, bold and courageous. To make our little planet better for all of us and for those that are yet to be born.

Chuck Reece (01:00:29): Now that my friends is what it takes to build a better South.

(music).

Chuck Reece (01:00:39): As we were putting this episode together, our newly hired assistant editor, Josina Guess asked me some questions about how we planned to end this episode. And I can't remember Josina's exact words, but they coalesced in my mind this way, "You can't just let Peggy Wallace and John Lewis walk hand in hand into the sunset and let everybody feel like the work is done." You know what? She was right.

Josina Guess (01:01:08): It seemed important that this podcast end with the sense that this work continues and that that's a moment to celebrate, but it's not a moment to rest. It's a moment to say, "And now where are we and where do we go from here?" And, um, it's, it's so tempting to wanna, you know, tie things up with a neat bow and say, "Look how far we've come, and here we are," but, um, but the reality is, you know... I was thinking about the, the Moth story that we listened to Sala Udin-

Chuck Reece (01:01:37): Right.

Josina Guess (01:01:37): ... um, it just talked about how he's decided to be a freedom fighter for the rest of his life.

Chuck Reece (01:01:44): Right.

Josina Guess (01:01:44): And he didn't say, "And now I'm done fighting." He said, "For the rest of my life, I'm doing this." And I, and I felt like it was important that, uh, we recognize that John Lewis is still fighting, Sala Udin is still fighting. And, and I, and I, and I see that Peggy Wallace is still fighting. Like thi- thi- this work is not, uh, ever done, and it's clearly not done in this day and age.

Chuck Reece (01:02:05): You and I had occasion, uh, over the last couple of months, uh, to have a discussion one day about, uh, the large house that had obviously been a plantation house in the pre civil war, an antebellum house. You asked me if I knew anything about the story of the house. And, what came out of my mouth was the guy who built it's name was so and so, and you looked at me and gave me, "Hey," that, "Hey, you're missing something," look-

Josina Guess (01:02:36): (laughs).

Chuck Reece (01:02:36): ... which I've come to appreciate very much.

Josina Guess (01:02:38): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:02:39): Uh, and you said, "Well, he didn't build it."

Josina Guess (01:02:44): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:02:45): What instantly came out of my mouth was, "You're right, he paid to have it built."

Josina Guess (01:02:49): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:02:50): And you gave me the look again.

Josina Guess (01:02:51): (laughs).

Chuck Reece (01:02:53): And you said, "Well, perhaps he paid some, but he also had an enslaved people building it."

Josina Guess (01:03:02): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:03:04): And I was like, "Yeah." What it told me was, was that there was so much more distant I, I had to cover if I really wanted to get a sense of what it's like to live in a black person's shoes in the South.

Josina Guess (01:03:20): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:03:21): You know, or anywhere in America.

Josina Guess (01:03:23): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:03:24): And I'll never know it completely.

Josina Guess (01:03:26): Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece (01:03:27): But it becomes our job to have those conversations.

Josina Guess (01:03:31): Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. I mean, I think it's just like, the hope would be that folks would, would really be paying attention to the places in their own communities where there's still work yet to be done and there's a lot. I mean, our whole country, all of the wealth, everything was built on, on, stolen labor and, and a system that was, you know... Racism was created to sustain that system. So it's just like, we can't... We, we've just begun but just to make it clear that like, it's a good thing to walk hand in hand across the bridge, and it's a good thing to see like where we're going but I, I... Like you think about the fact of like, who, who... Where are the grandchildren of all those people that, that beat folks on the bridge, you know? Wha- what are they talking about when they're behind closed doors?

Josina Guess (01:04:20): You know, I think that's the thing is just to know like are folks that were carrying out this violence reckoning with it, you know? Behind closed doors when there's not a black person in the room, are white people saying to their grandchildren, "I did a wrong thing, you know, and, and we ought to make this right. And we gotta really work on, um, on, on seeing it," 'Cause I just think there's just a lot of a temptation towards amnesia and towards just let's just move on. Let's put this behind us. And I mean, it's just, it's too, um, you know, the pain is too deep and the wounds are too deep to just say that we're done.

Chuck Reece (01:05:04): We're all just beginning to get the reconciliation done. So we're gonna leave that thought with you and come back to you next season to continue the work right before your very ears.

(music).

Chuck Reece (01:05:33): The second season of our podcast was produced by Sean Powers and edited by Josephine Bennett. Nothing about the show could happen without them. Sean's tenacity, Josephine's wisdom, and both sets of their genius ears. We also owe a shout out to assistant producer Rosemary Scott, a proud university of Georgia student who while working with GPB on an internship helped us think through how these issues look in the eyes of young adults in the South. She was invaluable to us. Our theme song, Ever South was written by Patterson Hood and his band, the Drive-By Truckers, and we heard additional tracks from my mountain home boy Eric Sales and from De Wolfe Music. If you like The Bitter Southerner Podcast, please do review it and write it on Apple podcasts even if you listen to us somewhere else. Please pile those reviews up while you wait for season three. And we wanna thank most of all the good folks at the Moth for allowing us to use part of Sala Udin's story for this episode. Now, you might already be a fan of the Moth Radio Hour, but I bet you don't know that it was founded in the South in Georgia. They reside in New York these days but the Moths work when it turns toward the South, still helps us reflect on our region's past and how to move it forward. All of us at the Bitter Southerner hope this marks just the beginning of a collaboration with the Moth. Our show is a co-production of Georgia Public Broadcasting and the Bitter Southerner Magazine. You can access more from each episode at gpb.org/podcast. Videos from our episodes are also on the Bitter Southerner YouTube channel, as well as full audio streams of every episode. I'm Chuck Reese and I'm gonna miss y'all. But my three instructions remain constant, and I want you to hold onto them until this fall when we'll be back. Hug more next, abide no hatred, spend your time doing what you love with who you love. And while you're at it, maybe learn to love a few people you haven't had a chance to get to know yet. It'll be good. It'll do all of us good. We'll see y'all next season.

(music end)