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Week four: WFL

Randy Robison Sheila Walsh

Nona Jones

Sheila: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh here with my co-host, Randy Robison. We have a great guest for you today. When I first met this woman, I remember her walking into the room and I thought, this is just like the consummate professional executive pastor, business leader. And then I got to know her and discovered she has quite a story to tell us. So please welcome Nona Jones to the show. It's so great to have you with us, Nona.

Nona: Oh, this is my pleasure, Sheila. It is so great to be here. Thank you for having me.

Sheila: Now your book, *Success from the Inside Out*: "Power to rise from a past to a fulfilling future." Would you take us back? Because honestly, when I read about your early childhood, A, it was devastatingly shocking, and then to see where God has brought you. But would you take our audience back to what that was like for you?

Nona: Sure. Well, I often think that we walk into the successful chapter that a person's life is on and we just assume that's the entire story. I know you know that to be the case.

I was born to a mother who didn't want to have children. She grew up in a home where there was a lot of poverty, a lot of violence so I think at an early age she decided she didn't want to have children. But my mother and father were married for 13 years when she found out she was pregnant with me. He was excited because he wanted to have children, but she actually cried. Unfortunately, halfway through her pregnancy he found out that he had terminal stomach cancer and he passed two months shy of my second birthday.

It was shortly after that that my mother became involved with, just a string of men, came in and out of her life and my life until she settled on a guy who became her live-in boyfriend when I was about five years old. I knew pretty early on that I didn't like him, which is why I always tell parents, if your child doesn't like someone, pay attention to that. But she allowed him to move into the house. And shortly after he moved in, he began sexually abusing me.

That experience, it not only devastated me and my identity, but I think it was compounded by the fact that he told me, "You better not tell your mom because she never wanted you anyway." It just devastated me. So I didn't tell her for a couple of years but after I did tell her, I was about seven-and-a-half years old, she had him arrested. But on the day of his release from jail she took me with her to pick him up and brought him back home where he proceeded to continue abusing me.

So it was a devastating childhood and I think the fact that I didn't grow up in a Christian home made it worse. I didn't know anything about God, hope, Bible, church, and so I tried to take my life at the ages of nine and eleven. I truly had no sense of hope in my life. So I tell people when they look at me today, I'm just like, I am a statistically improbable product of grace. God truly reached down from heaven and blessed and favored my life and so I'm so grateful for that.

Sheila: Amazing!

Randy: At what point, Nona did something change? Was there someone that intervened when you were a teenager or in adulthood? Because obviously something had to happen to give you an opportunity to heal, to give you some hope, some hope for a future because that is a very difficult thing to ever overcome.

Nona: No, that's such a great question. Yeah, so the fact that I didn't grow up in a Christian household, when I was 11 years old and in 6th grade, a classmate of mine came

to me and she invited me to go to church with her. I'd never heard of church, so I thought we were going to go over to her house and maybe play over that weekend. But when her mother came and picked me up, we went to this church place and I remember when we got out of the car there were all of these families walking up to the building holding hands and people were smiling and laughing. When I walked in the door, people who didn't even know me, they hugged me, they welcomed me, "We're so glad you're here!"

And the very first sermon I ever heard preached, the pastor said, "God is a father to the fatherless." What he didn't know is there were so many nights that I cried myself to sleep thinking that if my father had lived that I wouldn't have experienced what I experienced. So I think it was that moment that spoke to the hurt and the pain within me that really awakened me to a sense that wait a minute, there is a God that sees me and loves me, that I was fearfully and wonderfully made? Suddenly, I think it confronted what I thought was a deficiency in myself and replaced it with the idea that I did matter, and I was loved. So that really changed the trajectory of my whole life.

Sheila: Reading your book, Nona made me realize the power of the words that we speak over our children. Because you talk about when you are so young, nine, eleven, suicide attempts, but it seems to me that those words had been spoken over you by your mother's boyfriend. When you are told that you have no worth, that even your mother wished you hadn't been born, do you believe that that contributes to so many people who then attempt suicide, is because of words that have been spoken into their life?

Nona: Absolutely! Words have power. The Bible tells us that life and death are in the power of the tongue. I think that's why it is so important that as parents, and frankly, just as people, that we choose our words carefully. When someone already believes that they have no purpose, that they have no value, when someone says that it is almost like affirming what they already believe about themselves. And it makes them realize oh wait, maybe I don't have any purpose on this earth. So we do have to choose our words very, very wisely.

Randy: The title of your book that Sheila mentioned a moment ago is *Success from the Inside Out*, and in that you talk about how success really is not something that we can just do or conjure up on our own, but it has to be done within us first. Explain what you mean by that.

Nona: Well, I was very blessed, I was very fortunate. Despite all the trauma and dysfunction of my past, the Lord graced my life. I was able to achieve success at an early age in the professional world, but I could never experience contentment. I could never experience joy. I remember I would get awards and accolades, and I had the nice car and house and clothes and all those things, but I never felt a sense of peace. And I think that's what really started me on my journey to understanding what is success?

And it led me to the book of Joshua chapter one, verse eight where God told Joshua that if you meditate in my law day and night and do what I have said do, you will make your way prosperous and you will have good success. That qualifier "good" struck me as interesting because in order for God to say "your success would be good" it meant that there was a success that was not good. And that's what I was experiencing.

So the idea of *Success from the Inside Out* is that success begins within because there is nothing you can accumulate around you that will fill a deficit within you; and only God can heal what's broken within us.

Sheila: I was thinking about a gentleman I met on a flight not so long ago who is a very successful businessman. We got talking and he said, "But when I put my head on my pillow at night what I hear is my mother saying, 'I wish you'd never been born.'"

I think of the number of people in our nation who have not been able to confront the brokenness that is inside. How did that process happen for you, Nona?

Nona: This is such a good question. I think first of all, I totally resonate with that gentleman because there were so many nights when I literally heard the voice of my mom

telling me that I was unwanted, that I was stupid, that I would never be anything. And it is funny how your life can defy all of those odds and you can still believe that true -- you can still believe that's true. I think what really started me on the journey to I would say re-understanding my identity (I say re-understanding because I didn't understand) was forgiveness. The power of forgiveness is so underestimated. I didn't realize that I was holding on to bitterness, that I was waiting for my mother to apologize, that I was waiting for her to admit her wrong. And those were things that just never happened. So because I was waiting on that I couldn't experience the joy of the great things God was doing in my life.

So for me, it really became you know what? I have to forgive her. Not necessarily because she is sorry but because I deserve peace. Once I came to that realization and I was able to just release her from the burdens of my past that's when I began to heal, and I began to experience joy in my life.

Randy: I know that can be very difficult because, take like that boyfriend, the abusive boyfriend, he needed to go to prison; he didn't need to just be forgiven, at least from a legal standpoint anyway. How do you reconcile the need for justice and not denying when people do wrong with the idea of forgiveness?

Nona: Yeah. This is good, I'm glad you're asking this. The reality is when a wrong is committed there is an injustice and it creates an imbalance, whether it's a spiritual imbalance, psychological, emotional, it can even be a physical or material imbalance. When that balance is created, we naturally want to rectify it. The challenge becomes with what do we have the power to do? So in the case of her boyfriend, for example, the legal system could hopefully rectify the physical imbalance but what it couldn't rectify is the psychological, emotional and mental imbalance, and the spiritual imbalance that it created. I think that's where forgiveness comes in.

There are certain limits to what we call "natural justice" can fix. So much so, that he actually apologized for what he did but that isn't what healed me. What healed me was

forgiving him for what he did.

Sheila: Wow! That is so powerful. I love following your Instagram posts, Nona. I find them really challenging. You talk about the fact that the next generation, the younger generation are watching us. What is it that's on your heart about that?

Nona: Yeah, so the Pew Research, they did a study not too long ago where they were looking at the religious landscape in America. They found that the fastest growing segment of the so-called religiously affiliated are actually people who have no religious affiliation, people who are not identifying with any religious beliefs and those are Millennials and Generation Z. My heart breaks because I'm a Millennial and I talk to many people my age who are like, "I would never go to church. I could never be a Christian." Because they look at the way that we respond to things and they say, "I could never do that. That's immoral."

It concerns me when people look at us and they're like, they're immoral, and we're supposed to be the moral standard. So that's part of the reason why I do my best to even use my social channels just to remind us, as Christians, that our responsibility is not, for example, to any political party. Our responsibility is to the kingdom of God and to make sure that we reflect him in everything that we say and everything that we do.

Randy: One of the things that you work closely with is social media and the internet. One of the things you address in your book that I think is important, and I think it applies to especially to younger generations is the idea of knowledge, and understanding, and wisdom, and the difference between them. Because with the internet we all have just the world of knowledge at our fingertips. Understanding can be a little bit harder to get and it seems like wisdom is completely lacking in so many areas of our culture. What do you see when you look at those things and the importance of getting those right?

Nona: Yeah, I think what has happened is we have started to confuse knowledge with wisdom. So we say, "Well, I know the right thing." But knowing the right thing in our

mind is not necessarily going to lead to the practice of what is right, and that is wisdom.

I talk about how in the book when I was younger, I remember the G.I. Joe would end their cartoon always saying, "And now you know and knowing is half the battle." I was always like, well, what is the other half? What I realized is just knowledge for knowledge sake doesn't actually create righteousness in the world. Righteousness in the world is created through application and that's why understanding is important.

So I think, again, as Christians we have the responsibility to demonstrate through the work of our hands, the words of our mouth, where we go, what we do, we have to demonstrate what knowledge applied can do when it creates righteousness in the world.

Sheila: Nona, talk to us about your work with faith and prejudice? It's very important.

Nona: Well, I got to tell you, I had no desire to create a new organization over the summer. So shortly after George Floyd was murdered back in I think it was May, the end of May, I was out for a run. As you know, there was a lot of conversation happening about race and people were like, "We have to do something." I was like, Lord, what can I do? I'm one person, what can I do? I felt led because I do work in the social technology space to use social technology to try to educate the church nationally about issues of race and injustice in America.

So we did a week of broadcast conversations with civil rights leaders, theologians, scholars about the history of race and what our responsibility as Christians would be to address it. And we had six million people reached over the week. We had 33,000 comments. It was incredible to see God work.

But the mission of Faith and Prejudice is to bring the church together, to confront and dismantle racism in America. And the reason for that is again, this generation is watching. They care about these issues. I think it is important for the church to take a lead position on it. Not to deny it. It is sin. Let's just call it. Racism is sin and that's why we

have to do what we can to eliminate the power of sin within this country. So that requires the work of our heart and the work of our hands.

Randy: What do you think may be a blind spot that a lot of people in the church, especially people that are in the majority don't necessarily see that they really need to know in order to find some healing and bridge some of the gaps.

Nona: Yeah. I think part of our challenge is, and I'll give you an analogy. So if you've seen a beach ball, you know there are different strips of color. So there is like a blue strip, a red strip, a yellow strip, a green strip, and I think part of our challenge is we live our life on one strip of the ball. So if I'm on the blue strip, everything is blue. And if somebody was to talk to me about red I would say there is no such thing as red because all I know is blue. So I think the biggest blind spot, and I've talked to a lot of my white Christian brothers and sisters, the biggest blind spot is just recognizing that just because you haven't experienced it doesn't mean it is not real.

I think that where we get the opportunity to reflect the love of God is in saying to somebody, "You know what? I don't understand but will you help me try?" That's where we have the opportunity to demonstrate the love, the humility of God in a world that is filled with pride, in a world that is saying, "If I haven't experienced it, it's not real." We have the opportunity to say, "You know I haven't experienced that but help me understand where you're coming from." And that becomes love.

Randy: What do you think the biblical view of race is?

Nona: You know, I think that God did not design us to categorize ourselves by race. I think unfortunately, that has become a construct in our world, especially when you think back to the first enslaved Africans arrived here in the U.S., it became about the black people who were enslaved and the white people who were enslaving. So there created this dichotomy of experience. I think that's where race emerged.

But God created all of us in his image. He gave all of us his likeness. And as a result of that, we may have different nations, we may have different tribes, we may even have different clans, but we are all children of God. I think we have to return back to that, which is why when Jesus said that loving our neighbor as ourselves is the second greatest command like unto loving God.

Sheila: As you can tell, Nona has so much to share, and this book, *Success from the Inside Out*, if you have ever experienced brokenness in your past, and you think, A, I can never be free or B, God can never use me again, this is a story that will speak life and hope to you. I'm going to tell you how to get a hold of Nona's book.

First of all, I want to ask you, Randy and I want to ask you, there is some people right now who literally are losing their lives because they have no access to any clean water. Do you know that 800 million people in our world do not have access to a clean drinking source? And if you'll help us with that, then we're going to help you with Nona's book. Watch this.

On the mission field:

Open Captions:

Dangers of dirty water.

Our whole village gets their water from a small river. The water is not clean but it's all we have to use.

My daughter went to the hole to get water. She was gone too long, and we began to worry. I went to check on her, but I only found her bucket. When I looked further down into the hole, I saw my daughter. She had fallen in and drowned.

I sent my daughter to draw water with her friends. But before her friends were able to help her, she was dragged away by a crocodile. After searching for three days we found only half her body floating in the water. [Weeping]

He was only three years old. The diarrhea started but we had no way to transport him to the hospital. We finally found a bicycle and traveled as fast as we could but we never made it to the hospital. He died along the way. Each time I go to the water, I remember. I am trapped by fear when I see my other children drinking the dirty water.

We are suffering here. We drink dirty water. We're asking for help.

Studio:

Sheila: I remember each one of these women so clearly from our last trip to Africa. The woman who described what it was like when her daughter went off to get water and she was taking far too long and so she went to the hand-dug well and there it was, the yellow bucket but no little girl. I can't imagine the horror of looking into that filthy little well and there is her little girl.

And then she took us to the place where her daughter is buried, and she was heartbroken as you can imagine. And we sat on the rocks by that little dirty river with the woman whose daughter was taken by a crocodile. It is unspeakable horror.

But here's the thing that is even more devastating. They have no other choice. We drove for hours to get to that particular village and that's the only water they've got. So that's why I love what we do with Water for LIFE because you can unpack it so many ways, it brings life to a village, but it also gives life to the children of that village.

Do you know that we have been able to put in with your help over the years 7,000 wells? That is amazing. But our commitment this year, Randy is we want to put in 350 more wells. And I know we can do it.

Randy: We can! We can! But we have to have your help. You know, Sheila, when you mentioned those women that you were there with listening to their stories, I just think,

these are stories that unfortunately, are repeated in various forms all over the world, but they are stories that you can rewrite. And we do it one well at a time.

Here's the breakdown on those wells. The average well costs \$4,800. Some of you can give an entire well. I think there may be that rare person out there that can give, I don't know, five, ten wells? If you can do it, I would encourage you to do it because those wells service an average of 1,000 people each for decades, that's why we would call it a lifetime because they last so long, typically. You can rewrite these stories.

Now obviously, many of you don't have the wherewithal to drill an entire well by yourself, will you partner with others? Here's the breakdown. \$48 will help provide clean water for ten people for a lifetime. \$144 will help provide clean water to 30 people for a lifetime. Are you seeing the pattern here? When we join together, when you go online, when you go to the phone right now you start to rewrite the stories, and every story is precious. Every life is precious.

Will you do it? Will you do it today? I pray you will. Go to the phone, go online, make the best gift you can and join us as we give Water for LIFE.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Dirty disease-filled water. How desperate would a mother need to be to consider giving this contaminated substance to her child? For many mothers and their families living in extreme poverty, this is their only choice.

But with your help they won't have to make this choice ever again. Mission: Water for LIFE provides clean, disease-free water for thousands of children and their families giving them a life free from the fear of death. With your gift today you can help drill and establish 350 water wells this year. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five

children. A gift of \$48 will help provide ten. \$72 will provide for 15. And \$144 will help provide life-giving water for 30 people for a lifetime.

With your gift, we'll send you *Speak Your Name* devotions and declarations on the reality of Jesus. Filled with stunning imagery, these 40 encouraging devotions by Laney Rene serve as a reminder of the power of Jesus' name.

With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the "Be Refreshed" pitcher. This beautiful ceramic pitcher is decorated with Proverbs 11:25 and is sure to make a lovely addition to your table or home.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well. And you may request our brand-new, inspiring bronze sculpture, "Divine Servant."

Please call, write or make your gift online.

End of video

On the mission field:

Sheila: This is the water, this is only water that is available to this village where we have been spending some time. And honestly, as a mom -- as a mom it totally horrified me to see little ones just scooping this water and drinking it. You can probably see, it is absolutely filthy.

But I feel here that one of our main passions at *LIFE Outreach* is that God has called us, it is in our D.N.A., to be a voice for those who have no voice. And so that's why I'm coming to you and saying to you, we can be the answer to their prayers.

So please, will you help us right now? Will you dial that number on your screen? Go online, just give the best gift you can. Give up one thing that you don't really need to give

these people the one thing they really, really need, fresh clean water.

End of video

In the studio:

Randy: Thank you for going online or going to the phones right now. I do hope you will give the best gift you can. And just know that it is our mission to give life around the world. But we can only do it when you reach out and join us. Thank you for that. And as a reminder, Sheila's got a gift for you if you request it today.

Sheila: Absolutely! For any gift at all, we will be honored and thrilled to send you Nona's book, it is called *Success from the Inside Out*. But boy, it is a book that speaks life to you. Nona, thank you so much for being with us. We've just loved it.

Nona: Thank you! This has been an honor. I appreciate you both very much.

Sheila: It's been great! We will see you all next time on *LIFE Today*. From Randy, I'm Sheila, we'll see you next time!

Randy: Bye-bye.