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INTERVIEW WITH WINSTON STRICKLAND

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Interview with Winston Strickland
Conducted by Jay Lutz, Stephen Briggs, and Jeremy Watkins
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JL: Today's interview is going to be with Winston Strickland. Good morning, Mr. Strickland.

WS: Good morning, sir.

JL: Let me start out by asking this question. You did an interview with Kitty Kelley for the Cobb history series, and that was done in '94. Has anything changed, what's gone on in the last sixteen years?

WS: Well, I'm still a community servant, and I just put God first, then family, and sharing with the community, that's what I'm all about.

JL: Let me ask you, you've been in business a long time, and your two businesses are directly in Ward 5. How closely have you had a relationship with the councilmen?

WS: Every councilman that's been elected in Ward 5 I have known personally and have worked on projects with each of them to make things better for Ward 5, and for the people that live in Ward 5. That's the most important thing that you can do.

JL: Can I ask you specifically about Hugh Grogan? What do you remember about Mr. Grogan?

WS: I think Hugh Grogan was the first elected councilman in Ward 5. He worked hard drawing the lines of Ward 5 to make sure that we would be well represented. He worked very hard to make that happen, and make us a part of the system. The lines are very important, so we can let people hear our voice politically. That's the way you raise the bar, and he raised the bar for Ward 5.

JL: Would he come into your restaurant, and into your barbershop?

WS: Several times he made his presence known. We did not agree on things all the time, but in the meantime, he was a person that would not walk away in disagreement. If we disagreed, we would come back together for the people of Ward 5.

JL: Did you have a relationship with John Hammond?

WS: Very much so. I think I got cross with councilman Grogan at one time. There were some issues that were his own personal matters, and the local paper was reporting some discrepancies in regard to his personal matters. When it comes down to it, I figure if

you're representing the people of Ward 5, you've got to have first of all good credit, and you've got to move through the system with leadership. You must demonstrate you are taking care of your own responsibilities, and then you're able to take care of other people. All and all, he was a good man.

JL: You think that's why he wasn't re-elected for a second term?

WS: That's exactly right.

JL: When John Hammond came in, was it a productive tenure, his time as councilman?

WS: John was very effective, and he got some things done, since Hugh Grogan was the first African-American elected and raised the bar for us. John was waiting on the mistakes to surface because he was interested in politics and he could score real well.

JL: How about James Dodd?

WS: James Dodd is a very good councilman. He was my friend, and we got him elected. He served us well. There was a street closed over in Baptist Town, and they put up barricades to separate blacks and whites, saying it was a drug related issue and needed to cut the traffic over on Hunt Street. They eventually tore down the projects and built new subdivisions...and I believe they made their point. I guess they got rid of all the projects over there, but we've learned how to live together. Some times our differences are at odds, but we find out how we can work with people, and that's the main point.

JL: Sure. That was Lyman Homes?

WS: Lyman Homes, yes.

JL: How about Anthony Coleman?

WS: Anthony Coleman has been a new spark plug, and he addressed a lot of issues in regard to homes, with the decline in the economy and downsizing. He's been there for the people, connecting them. They know they are well represented on issues that make life better for families. I've been real pleased with his leadership.

JL: He just got re-elected about two or three weeks ago. Going into this new term, is there anything specifically that you would like to see him do?

WS: Well, I continue to think that you've got to have good representatives in all areas of politics. If you're not at the table it's nothing you can do. You've got to be there, and you've got to have some hands on the projects and not just mouth. See, a lot of people have mouth religion and mouth politics. All they're going to do is talk, but that will not work in this day and time. You've got to put your hands on something and put your legs to it and find a way that you can help people.

SB: I'm Stephen Briggs. In a recent article, October 1st, just a couple of months back, you're seated with Don Johnson and Dr. Fisher. How are these people influential to you or you to them?

WS: First of all, Dr. Fisher came by my barber shop in 1981, and he was visiting here with his brother-in-law. He walked in, and I had a couple of customers, and they said, "This is Dr. Fisher." I said, "Is he a medical doctor?" And they said, "Yes, he's an internist." I said, "Oh, how long before you can practice?" He said, "I can practice now." So after we found out that he had all the tools that were necessary, I said, "Let's go to lunch." He said, "No, I've had lunch; why don't we just go have a Coke or something and sit down and talk." We went up to Shillings and sat down and talked, and I really liked his presence and the way he presented himself. I said, "Let me see if I can get a board member to come and join us." At that time I called Charles Ferguson, who was on the board at Kennestone. We stayed there for about twenty minutes, and I said, "What else can we do?" Charles said, "Let's go see Bernie Brown." He was at Kennestone at the time, so we called Bernie Brown, and he said, "I'll meet y'all up there and spend some time with Dr. Fisher." So we did that. In the meantime while that was going on I came on back to the barbershop. They came back by and said it went well and asked, "Where do we go from here?" I said, "We're going to bring Dr. Fisher back after you think about it." He was excited. We scheduled some meetings with the bank, the superintendent, and at that time we were trying to find a place for him to live. He came back in January and we had him here in June. We had gotten the information to build his house. Believe it or not, Ed Mulkey, who was the president of First National Bank I think at that time—after we met with him, he got up and he said, "How much would it take you to get him?" I said, "I really don't know." He looked at Dr. Fisher's wife and he said, "Honey . . ." She said, "I've never heard of such." I said, "Well, we're at the table, and let's see what we can work out. We want you." He said, "If I put \$10,000 and establish you an account will that be fine?" He said, "No, I've never heard of such." By June we had put all the pieces together and met with the community, and we got him here, and that's a factual thing that we worked hard and used our skills to demonstrate we're professional businessmen.

SB: And he still has a practice here?

WS: Yes, he is one of the best. And he's very influential to me. We work very hard together for the people of this community and the young folks, making sure they have good opportunities for education. We established Blacks United for Youth, Inc. Dr. Fisher helped establish the group, and Don Johnson helped establish it. And Don is my insurance agent; he handles all my insurance.

SB: I'm using one of his pens right now.

WS: Right, right.

JL: How quickly did his practice pick up? Was it hit the ground running and he was successful?

WS: It was somewhat of a step-by-step process. We introduced him in the community; we asked several citizens of Cobb County and the city of Marietta to come in and challenged them to embrace him. We let them know that we had a doctor that was interested in coming to the community, and a good crowd showed up, and the word just spread. You also had the medical doctors at Kennestone come in and put hands around him and moved forward.

SB: In my aspect of the NAACP project, being the business aspect of it, I want to know, as far as Lockheed goes, how much did Charles Ferguson have to do with Lockheed, and also a fellow up the road I interviewed recently, Reginald Kemp, who is familiar with your practice, what kind of influence did these gentlemen have on you?

WS: Reginald Kemp, his wife and I kind of grew up together. In the meantime when first meeting, his wife, he stopped at my dad's house in the 1950s, probably around '52, '51, and that's the first time I ever laid eyes on Reginald Kemp. He was a Lockheed man. He had been in the service, and soon after then he married Vinnie Mae, but in the meantime he's somewhat family because of his wife. He'll always discuss things that will make a difference and will be helpful for the community, most of the time when things come up. They want to have my ear and see what I have to say. They don't know I'm just a sharecropper's son; I don't have too much information.

JL: Just in your opinion, how important has Lockheed been to the local community?

WS: It's been a life jacket for the whole State of Georgia. People arrived from Tennessee, probably Macon, all over this place. They had a program where you save a dollar and they put fifty cents with it. I've seen some people walk out of Lockheed with \$100,000 in their pockets. That's unheard of for a minority back in the day, being able to educate their children and do all the things that make a real life for people. It's been a builder.

JL: They were ahead of the game, right?

WS: Oh, yes. They put us in a different mindset, in terms of work ethic. They worked hard to make sure the skills and the vo-tech schools and all those things that you see around us have really benefited this whole community.

JL: Jeremy?

JW: I'm really going to change time and subject here but—this is Jeremy Watkins—when did you establish yourself as a businessman in Cobb County or in Marietta?

WS: In 1962, I was a sharecropper's son, and in the meantime I didn't like being a sharecropper's son. I wanted to elevate myself, and I knew that I had to go and get some kind of skill to make my life a success. I love cutting hair. I used to cut my dad's hair and my brother's hair. I've looked at all kinds of professions that maybe that could fit me, and I entered barber school in 1962, in January. While in school, I worked for Fulton

Bag & Cotton Mill. I was a little tub driver inside the mill. I worked there for a year until I finished barber school. I finished it in June, a six month program, and by November I opened my barber shop at Eastside Cab Stand Barber Shop right over there. A good friend of mine named Richard Robbins was there, and he was interested and said, "Why don't you come up here?" And that was the barbershop. It looked good for me, and in the meantime he said, "I'll give you a job driving a night cab and working in the daytime cutting hair. Believe it or not, he let me have the money to open my barber shop up, but it was kind of his barber shop at first because he had me paying \$60.00 a week, which I was making about \$50.00 a week. I still have my last pay stub from Fulton Bag & Cotton Mill, and I think it was \$52.00.

SB: As I recall, you told him it was \$60.00.

WS: Yes.

SB: Good business move.

WS: So those were the kind of things that I was in the business field, and I was learning things. I got out there and started making money in 1964. In 1962 I was driving a '54 Ford. It was clean, and I thought I was somebody on the horizon. Believe it or not my mother wanted to go to Detroit by car, and I carried her up there. We did just make it back from Detroit because I blew the motor up in that '54 Ford. So we got back, and I was making enough money to buy me a brand new 1964 Chevrolet. I bought that, and I was on my way, and plus I was engaged to a wonderful woman, Rosetta Decatur. In 1964 we got married. This has been a progressive climb ever since. I also owned a record shop. I don't like ownership, really. I say I'm in management because I honor God in all phases, and when you say you own something, I think your blessings are on hold because God wants to be first in all things. My daddy was a preacher; he taught me that. He said, "Son, don't you ever get into the ownership." I didn't realize that until here lately. If you really want to have some peace and joy, you have to stay where God can operate at a level that you can reach the highest of the high. Look for the sun, and it's up there, and he will bless you.

JL: How much of an inspiration and how much of the drive that you have in business comes from your father and I guess his experiences as a sharecropper?

WS: My dad had a seventh grade education, but he knew the Bible, and that took him far. He was very instrumental in my life. That's him right over there, that bottom picture there. I've got him there looking at me. He passed away in 1988, but, let me tell you, he's still in my life, and when I think about crossing that line, I look over, and I know he's looking down upon me. He has the card on me and is very much is a part of my life now because of what he put into me. He was Pastor of two churches during his life and kept everybody in peace, and that is a joy. That's the reason; God and my father are a cause of me being where I am today. My mother was really hard, she was hard on me. She said, "Boy, if you make a dollar, you save a nickel." She was a part of that too. She

drove that in me to make me a saver and then by introducing me to being a saver, that helped me become an investor.

JL: You said that you enjoyed cutting hair. How important was it that you went into a business that you enjoyed?

WS: Well, when you're a sharecropper's son and you know you want some changes in your life and you want to use as the foundation what is meaningful to you, what you value and what builds character, that's what my mom and daddy put into me; that was very important to me. I don't know of anybody that I owe that I didn't pay. I remember in 1958 I worked at a service station, and I reached down to fix a fan belt, and I cut my fingers across there. Dr. Underwood sewed it up. Dr. Underwood's probably still living now. I left Marietta to go to barber school, and I came back in 1962, and I paid him. He said, "No question about it, you will succeed and be a good businessman because you believe in paying your fellow man." That's what really got me. I've learned some things about being a businessman. My name is Winston Strickland—that's what my parents named me—but everybody calls me Strick. But at the end of the day, your social security number is what follows you.

JL: There's no more secret!

WS: That's a joy.

JL: It sounds like you knew a lot of the doctors in the area. Do you remember a man named Wilburn Weddington?

WS: I knew him real well; he's a cousin of mine.

JL: Oh really? He's actually been someone we've been looking to interview. He's got an extremely impressive record as a doctor.

WS: He's in Columbus, Ohio. He visits here at least twice a year or something. He has a farm out in Paulding County. There are some people who know how to get a hold of him. James Dodd I think knows him very well.

JL: Oh really. I have a contact number for him, but it is a local number, and I know he lives up in Columbus.

WS: Yes, James Dodd has his Columbus number. That's how you could get a hold of him.

JL: Do you know the reason why he left Marietta?

WS: I think he had some family problems, but I won't get into that. It was a family matter. I think he and his wife separated. They had some wonderful children. But I'm not saying that I know, but I know that he left here and went to Columbus. Bessie, she died. They've been very successful. They had some successful children too.

JL: Oh really? He's a professor emeritus at the medical school up in Ohio State University.

SB: And you knew him from Paulding County?

WS: Yes, he was in our family.

SB: I see because that's where you originally came from.

WS: Yes, I'm from Paulding County.

SB: Paulding County and then went to Bartow.

WS: Yes. If you stir the pot you'll find some kin!

JL: Do you remember anything about the Lemon Street High School closing over here?

WS: I was here.

JW: If you don't mind, I was just going to try to lead into something. When you were first working here in the 1960s in Marietta, did you have predominately black customers?

WS: Well, that is right. All my customers down through the years have primarily been black, but recently I had a great article that the *Marietta Daily Journal* printed on me, and we're running on empty even when it comes down to blacks in this area. They talking about all the housing projects, and that's really where I got my grill business from. They moved them way out in Powder Springs and Mableton, Austell, and they just left us here running on empty. It was joy that we were able to be with a young lady, Sally Litchfield, that wrote that article. But in the meantime, your real name is a number, and that's your social security number. They have all the information about you in that social security number. When you let people have it, they know more about you—or just as much about you—as you do.

We were at a non-profit dinner, and a young lady came up named Karla who was Governor Roy Barnes' niece and introduced me to Sally, and I was telling them about how things were kind of leaning all these years. I never would have thought, so she came, and she said, "Let me see, if I can I help you." Believe it or not, Otis Brumby came over and had lunch with me. He said, "We don't want you to leave Marietta." So we've been able to attract some whites in these later years. We've always had a good relationship with white and minority business people from the mayor and all the things that were going on over the years. I've always dabbled and dabbled in a little politics and it's been a blessing.

JW: What I'm trying to get to, I've been told by other people in the area that in the '60s when the schools integrated that it affected the sense of community. African Americans felt

their strong sense of the community was weakened or they lost that sense. Did you notice that at all as far as business went?

WS: Yes in a sense, the strength of the black community has been the schools, the preachers, and when you find yourself separated from those two, and it is somewhat political in a sense. You don't have a strong sense of political muscles. You've weakened your strength, even from the educational system. People can find a way to dilute your strength if they can dilute your church and your schools. You just really have to have some strong roots to where you can really be successful. It's got to come from your family. I always tell people I can really find out about you, the first thing I want to know, and I'll probably ask you all something about this, tell me something about your dad and your mama, and I can pretty well figure you out.

JL: Apples don't fall too far from the tree! [laughter]

WS: But it's been a missing link, and we will continue to focus in on that. And I'll tell you another thing: you see the driving point for success has always been our educational system. But if you really don't have some counsel for these young folks now... getting them in to the real work force, technologies and math and engineering and other things—just hard working muscles don't cut it; they don't want your muscles any more. That's nothing but a trick. Just going to school won't cut it either. Most of the time, you can't be successful if you're not focusing and planning. That's the way I see it. You really have to think outside the box when it comes down to it. There's so much pressure on the parents too. They're just really trying to get you out of high school and get you in college. They're not listening to the real counseling of what it would really take to be successful. Those are the kind of things that are missing. That link is missing in all of our upbringing. We're strong, but lack information that will serve us well in that aspect.

SB: You say you at least recommend a master's degree.

WS: Oh you've got to get a master's degree, and you've got to know where to get it at. But make sure you're focusing in on the right thing so that you can use it to make that ladder strong.

JL: The longtime principal over here was M.J. Woods, Professor Woods. Did you know him at all? Did he come in at all?

WS: Oh, yes, I knew Mr. Woods very well; I cut his hair for years and years. The principal after Mr. Woods was Professor [S.R.] Ruff. He's still living. He's in Tennessee, in Chattanooga, I think. He's got some age on him. I cut his kids' hair, and I used to cut most of the professors and the judges, the majority of the judges, like Justice Robert Benham who was on the Supreme Court, I cut his hair. He still comes here.

JL: Does he?

WS: Oh yes.

JL: He's a Cartersville resident.

WS: Oh yes, we've got a little pack up there!

JL: He's another one we'd love to get for the project. He was Supreme Court Justice for Georgia.

WS: Yes.

JL: What do you remember about Mr. Woods?

WS: Mr. Woods was an icon of education. He was very quiet, and he and his wife [Kathryn Roberson Woods] had a balance. Mrs. Woods, she was a go-getter. She helped bring balance and strength into that family. Professor Woods made sure that the community stayed in touch with the building process, yes, that's about as much as I can say. He was involved in a lot of projects. He was better at it than I was. You couldn't see him but he was always in the room.

JL: He was a driving force.

WS: He was a driving force! [laughter]

JL: Do you guys have any other questions?

SB: Jeremy?

JL: Do we have everything we need?

SB: When you were opening up your practice on Cole Street and North Marietta Parkway....

WS: Cole Street right here, yes, right, I was here.

SB: At North Marietta Parkway?

WS: Yes, it was 117 Cole Street where I opened up. I was in a house.

SB: You were trying to get some land to open that business. You stated that it was hard to borrow money at the time. Do you think it's just as difficult to borrow money today as back then? You actually mentioned that even up until 1994 you stated that it was still difficult for African-Americans to borrow money. Do you still think it's like that today or do you think times have changed?

WS: I think it's what I stated a while ago that your social security number will justify what moves you need to be making. But in the meantime, back in my time, I was always building relationships even with the board of finance, like the community bank, the

Bartow County bank, Cartersville Loan & Savings. I always had the ear to the chairman, you know. I found out who they were, and I found out politically who they supported. There was a fellow named Jerry White. He was a lawyer then, and he wanted to be judge. I had a good doctor that was there. They helped me build a good relationship with that board, helped me to borrow the money to build this place. I sat at the table with them. I drive through the nights with them, partied with them, you know. I was there to listen to make sure that I was on the right page. When Marietta Federal turned me down, I went straight to the chairman and told him I needed some money to build a building down here. He said, "Well, Strickland, this is where friendship separates." I said, "It is business now, that's the reason I came to you." So in the meantime they approved my loan within a month or a month and a half, and I built this building. I started building it somewhere in February or March, and we were through with it in July. But we put it on the fast track. We had people that I built relationships with, the cement company, and they just brought the blocks down here and laid them down. My good friend Walter Moon, who is still a partner in a lot of my things, helped me and I helped him. He's got some qualities that I valued, and I think I had some qualities that he valued. So we partnered very well. The success hasn't all been Winston Strickland; it's been a team effort. You can't do anything by yourself; you're just on your way to failure most of the time, because you're going to need some people that make sense in this day and time.

JL: Can I get you to talk a little bit more about Reverend Moon?

WS: Oh, he's been very instrumental to the growth of this whole community. He served on the [Marietta] Civil Service Board. He's been on the [Marietta] Board of Education. He's been one of the highest probably paid persons in the Post Office. In Alabama we tried to get him to try to make it. He made it better for Marietta and Cobb County. We had the knife approach on a lot of things that we wanted out of the Post Office, but he said, no, I'm not going there. He's a minister. I haven't seen him do anything that's not done the right way. He's solid as a rock.

JL: I know he's going to work with Councilman Coleman as an advisor on one of the committees.

WS: Yes, he's on the Citizen's Advisory Committee for Marietta Parks. [Before the 3 November 2009 referendum to approve \$25 million of bonds to improve and expand the city parks system] I called that meeting [of citizens from Ward 5] and put him as chair in bringing the pastors together. I called the meeting to make sure that we were at the table. Really, actually, I didn't even think that we could meet, but I told all the pastors, "Now, if we win, we'll be at the table. If we lose, we'll just be where we were when we started."

JL: So for the record, could you talk a little bit about the bond issue?

WS: I think that we've got to be in a position to justify some recreation for the children. They really don't have anything to do. If we don't do something, it is our failure. I know there's some strength in the hearts of the people like myself and these community folks to meet some of the things that weren't acceptable. It just wasn't there for blacks or whites.

It's a new day now, and everybody's got to come together now to make it better for recreation for our children when they can find a way to exhaust some of this energy, and we want them on the right path of life. I think it's an engine for success, and I saw that. There were a lot of people that didn't see it, and I had doubt in my mind, but I also had joy and a foundation that it could see it happen. I said, "Lord this is you and whatever you see fit for this city of Marietta and Cobb County because everybody is going to be using it." I think it's one of the best projects that we could call. It's going to cost us a little something, but for our children it's worth it all.

JL: Sure. I know one of the arguments against the bonds issues is the issue of money and the economy and all that. Who are some of the other people that are on the committee with you?

WS: We had Anthony Coleman, James Dodd, Reverend Travis, Reverend Walter Moon—he chaired that meeting over at Turner Cathedral over here. Let's see, we had Reverend Garrett. Reverend Marcus was there too. Who else was there? James Dodd, Anthony Coleman. We had a couple of whites that put in some money in this project. We said that we would work hard with Ward 5 to make sure that we'd be on the plus side and that happened. We put it together to make that happen. But we had a good showing of blacks. We went around and around with some of the things that was going on within the wards.

JL: Do you know when Ward 5, did they have a plan for where the park would be?

WS: It's going to be over on the other side of North Marietta Parkway. You know where they're building this new bank right here?

JL: I think.

WS: Cole Street, on Cole and Montgomery, it's going to be in there. They might go all the way to Fairground, all this redevelopment, and it's going to be near that approximately where they tore all the projects down and all that; they're going to do a lot of investments in there.

JL: Right now is that what you'd say you're working on the hardest as far as the political aspect?

WS: In the political aspect, that's right.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WS: I'm going to get deeply involved with the governor's race, yes. I put together a team of two, and we initiated 31,000 for the governor about a month ago. We had a great showing. We're ready to go, and we'll take any challenge that comes on! [laughter] That's the first time I've ever raised that kind of money too as a team. I've got a great team.

JL: Sure. What's your relationship like with Governor Barnes?

WS: Oh, I can go out there and stay all night! He's just like my brother; this is the only black brother he's got! [laughter]

JL: Do you think he's still got the fire to . . .

WS: No question. I know it. He will get us back on track. We just need more workers like you all.

JL: Let me ask you a little bit about, one of the projects that's going to be coming up. What I'm hoping is it's going to be between the city council and Kennesaw State. We're going to be looking especially in Lemon Street, Fort Hill area at doing some preservation work, particularly getting the former Lemon Street School actually on the National Register of Historic Places. Is that something that you think is a good idea; would you be behind that?

WS: Well, in Cartersville, I chaired the renovation—we built a school up there and we put a statue there of Professor [John Stanley] Morgan, Sr. [principal of the Summer Hill School until his retirement in 1962; he was replaced by his son, J.S. Morgan, Jr.], who was along with Mr. Woods back then in the day. So what we put together, business people and all the folks and I chaired that, and we had to raise \$200,000. We accomplished that, and we've got a statue up there in Cartersville. If you all haven't seen it, you have to see it. It's up on a hill, a project, and we put together a great team and raised the money and the statue is there, and the school is there, and it's an historical cornerstone in Bartow County. If you haven't seen it you need to see it. Dr. Scott knows about it. So I chaired that.

JL: Yes, we're hoping to maybe sometime over the spring present an application to the federal government about getting that on the national register.

WS: That would be great.

JL: Yes.

JW: It would bring tourism.

SB: As history students, that's one of our concerns.

WS: Yes, Kennesaw College, they've helped us out a lot. They had a lot of interest in that.

JL: There's talk about maybe creating a museum exhibit for the school.

WS: We've got a museum up there too; it's up on the hill. You need to look at that, go up there and look at it and get more familiar with it. It's a joy. We have all the PTA presidents and all around and probably every student just about has bought a brick in the walkway of that project and when they finished school and all that kind of stuff. It's a wonderful project.

JL: I've seen those type of fund raisers where you buy the paving stone and then it's place in. I actually think they have one at the museum here also.

SB: Yes, where you get your name engraved.

JL: Sure. Well, let me ask you as the final question. Well, first of all is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to put on the record?

WB: I think I'm out. [laughter]

JL: So let me finish with this question. In fifty years from now, what would you like the Winston Strickland legacy to be? How do you want to be remembered?

WB: I would like to be remembered that with God and family, I served Cobb County and the city of Marietta to the best of my ability, and I thank God for it.

JL: Mr. Strickland, thanks a lot for sitting with us today.

WB: Thank you so much for coming.

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