

## **ERIC WATKINS | DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH**

Diamonds in the rough. The greatest facets of our humanity sparkle when we learn from our past mistakes, make better decisions for the future, and encourage others to radiate the same light.

A child prodigy. I started high school at 11 years old. I graduated, matriculated into college and majored in business by age 15. I earned three certificates in business by 17. But while working to complete my business degree, I was wrongfully and unlawfully arrested for a murder that I did not commit. My arrest was based on a “theory of accountability,” in the murder of my stepfather. Based on police misconduct and abuse, my case was dismissed. Four years went by, no new cases. It was wrongfully reinstated and I was tried, solely as an accomplice, and sentenced to natural life. The shooter and his accomplices were all freed due to plea deals. And somehow, here I am with a natural life sentence, considered irredeemable.

But since then, over these 27 years, I completed my degree; I triple majored in American Jurisprudence, Transformative Justice, and Education, and earned a Bachelor's degree from Northeastern Illinois University. I went on to earn my Masters degree in Restorative Justice. And now I teach a workshop to help and inspire others for our community, to help heal our community. I also provide education to people impacted by violence and mass incarceration like myself.

Throughout my journey I've consistently seen that prayer is human beings' highest form of education and communication. It is the vehicle that moves our spirits and our souls past the dusty clay of our material world to connect with God. It acknowledges that life and lives have purpose, and aren't aimless products of non-intelligent, haphazard events. We are wonderfully made, we are wonderfully created by an awesome Creator. Diamonds in the rough.

*Eric Watkins is a Northeastern Illinois University graduate and earned a Master's degree in Christian and Restorative Justice Ministry from North Park Theological Seminary, graduating with high honors and the "Innovative Ministry" award. Eric is also the founder and director of H.E.A.L (Higher Education Ameliorates Lives)—a mentoring ministry that provides mentorship and college scholarships*

*for youths from violence and mass incarceration impacted communities and contexts.*

*Apart from being a scholar and philosopher, Eric is currently an intern with the office of IL State Senator Rachel Ventura.*