

Bryan Stevenson on Ellen Degeneres Show June 8, 2020

We're back with Michael B. Jordan. And joining us is the man that Michael plays in Just Mercy. This is lawyer Bryan Stevenson, everybody. So we were talking about you before you came out here. You have been working for 30 years to try to get people out of prison that are wrongly accused. You have helped over 140 people. I just have to read this, first of all. I'm sure you never thought a movie was going to be made about your life, or that Michael B. Jordan would be playing you. We'll get to that in a second, because that's got to be wonderful to hear that he's playing you. In the '70s, there were 300,000 people in jail. Now, there are 2.2 million in jail. One in three black babies will end up in jail. Black defendants are 11 times more likely to get the death penalty than white ones. It's infuriating.

Stevenson: It is. And that's what drew me into this work. I mean, I feel like we're in a crisis. We have the highest rate of incarceration in the world. 6 million people on probation and parole. There's 70 million Americans that have criminal arrests, which means that they're often disfavored when they try to get jobs or try to get loans. 132 million people in this country have family members in our jails and prisons. And it would be one thing if it was necessary. But we put people in jails and prisons for silly things. I'm representing people who are serving life sentences for writing a bad check of \$50, or simple possession of marijuana-- life without parole. So we have this over incarceration and this excessive punishment problem. And that's what drew me into this work. And it's one of the reasons why I feel like it's so urgent that people learn and know more about what's happening.

DeGeneres: Absolutely. You talk about people of color being presumed dangerous. And this story is crazy.

Stevenson: It's happened to me. I went into a courtroom, just a couple of years ago. I'd just argued a case at the US Supreme Court. And I was there in this courtroom in the Midwest to do a hearing. And when I walked in, I had my suit and tie on. I was sitting at the defense counsel's table. And the judge walked in. And when he saw me, he started screaming at me. He said, hey, hey, hey. You get back out there in the hallway. I don't want any defendant sitting in my courtroom without their lawyer. And I had to explain to him, I said, no, no, judge. I am the lawyer. My name is Bryan Stevenson. And he started laughing, and the prosecutor started laughing. And I made myself laugh because I didn't want to disadvantage my client. The client came in. We did the hearing. But after it, I was thinking, what is it when this judge saw a middle-aged black man in a suit and tie, it didn't even occur to him, that's a lawyer. And that kind of thinking is what's behind all of the frustration when police shoot unarmed black and brown people. It's behind the frustration that so many people have when their loved ones are carted off to prison for things they didn't do. And that's part of what we're trying to get at through this story.

DeGeneres: Well, you know, number one, that he even said that to you. But then he laughs afterwards instead of being embarrassed and saying, oh my God. I'm so sorry. And it's incredible.

Stevenson: Well, you know, we haven't done in this country what other countries have done, which is to try to engage in a reckoning in a truth and reconciliation process. In South Africa, outside of their Constitutional Court, there are symbols and emblems designed to make sure that no one forgets the injustice of apartheid. But in this country, we haven't talked about slavery. We haven't talked about the native genocide. We don't talk about lynching. We haven't created the kind of memorialization symbols that are designed to make sure we are truthful and honest about this history. You start talking about race, and people get nervous. And that has to change. And that's why I'm hoping that we will have an era of truth and justice in this country. And we shouldn't fear it, because I just think there's something better waiting for us in America. I do.