

Announcer (00:00):

C13 Originals. If you have any tips about Jerry Falwell Jr. or Liberty University, you can contact us at tips@gangstercapitalism.com. We can ensure anonymity.

Tessa Russell (00:21):

I grew up in a very religious conservative household. I actually was homeschooled my whole life along with my two younger siblings. My family used this term “things of the world,” which was more liberal ideas, believing in science and just simple things that were kind of frowned upon. I did feel a little bit separated from the outside world. There was kind of this feeling of like, I feel like I’m missing out. What kind of things am I not experiencing or not learning about that so many other people, my age are experiencing?

Andrew Jenks (01:06):

This is Tessa Russell, Liberty class of 2020.

Tessa Russell (01:12):

I really didn’t have a whole lot of friends growing up. And so coming into Liberty as a freshman, I spent a lot of time getting to know girls in my hall or my classes. And I started getting more involved with my prayer group in my hall. And as I start to get to know people, I started realizing, oh, everyone keeps talking about boys are meeting in class and boys in the hall or boys in the dorm. And I kind of realized I wasn’t interested in anyone. Growing up we weren’t really allowed to date. We had been told if you’re dating someone, it should be because you think you could marry them. And so I think there was a lot of pressure on oh, if I go on a date with someone, it means that I think I’m going to marry them.

Tessa Russell (02:00):

And so I had kind of just avoided that because I never felt those feelings growing up. I was just like, “Oh, I’m not quite ready yet.” When I went to Liberty I think the feeling of, oh should I be in a relationship? Should I be dating? Kind of started coming back up for me especially as people started dating. And my roommate, the first week of college had a boyfriend already and I felt kind of like, “Oh am I falling behind?” And as these conversations were happening, I really came to realize I’m not interested in guys. Not only that, but I feel maybe I’m attracted to women.

Tessa Russell (02:47):

And that was really frightening for me because I just, I didn’t know what to do with that. I really wasn’t sure where do I go from here? Because the limited education that I had on gay people was that it’s a sin and God’s going to punish them. I don’t think I even knew that gay people existed until I was junior or senior in high school. I had not even heard that term. I had no frame of reference for what that was. And even at Liberty, I had heard some “ex-gay speakers” come and speak about how God delivered them from their sin. If you’re gay, you have to work through this. This is your burden to bear. And so I kind of felt like, “Well, even if I am gay, this is just something I have to work through.”

Tessa Russell (03:52):

I was super scared to even hint at the thought that I could be gay to anyone at Liberty. Liberty has a rule book that they called the Liberty Way. And they very explicitly define that relationships outside of a “natural born man and natural born woman” are prohibited. And so I did not want anyone at Liberty to know I was gay. And so I kind of assumed that I was alone in this and I must not tell anyone otherwise, I don’t know what could happen.

Andrew Jenks (04:45):

From C13 Originals, a Cadence13 Studio, I’m Andrew Jenks and this is Gangster Capitalism season three. Jerry Falwell Jr., and Liberty University.

Music (04:57):

(singing)

Jerry Falwell Sr. (05:24):

Before you watch this next program entitled an expose of the radical gay and lesbian agenda, I need to warn you. What you’re about to see is not for the squeamish and it’s certainly not appropriate for children. So parents please use the utmost discretion when viewing this tape.

Andrew Jenks (05:47):

This is Jerry Falwell senior hosting a special episode of his television show, The Old-Time Gospel Hour. It’s an expose as he calls it, of The March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights in 1993.

Jerry Falwell Sr. (06:06):

I believe that April, 25 1993 is a day in America that will down go down in [inaudible 00:06:15]. I sent two film crews undercover and incognito of course. What I saw was shocking. And I warn you now, please do not allow any young children to see what we are about to show you.

Andrew Jenks (06:30):

The footage of LGBTQ people marching for equal rights isn’t shocking. But the things Falwell had to say certainly are.

Jerry Falwell Sr. (06:39):

Should this aberrant deviant sexual behavior be accepted? What works on the horizon? The acceptance of bestiality? Sex with animals? The Bible is quite clear regarding homosexuality. It is wrong. It is an abomination in the eyes of God. We do serve a God of love, but this God of love also hates sin. Right now

Andrew Jenks (07:04):

Imagine two plus hours of this.

Jerry Falwell Sr. (07:06):

Well, there's a major problem in our country and the people

Andrew Jenks (07:09):

But this tape isn't nearly the most vital thing Falwell Sr. has had to say about the LGBTQ community. Listen to what he said after 911.

Jerry Falwell Sr. (07:20):

I really believe that the pagans and the abortionist and the feminist of the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU people for the American way, all of them who tried to secularize America, I front the thing in their face and say "You helped this happen."

Andrew Jenks (07:42):

Now imagine being at Liberty University, the school Falwell Sr founded with a conduct code that prohibits relationships outside of "a natural born man at a natural born woman." While discovering that your sexual orientation or gender identity exists outside of those constructs. Students have told us that when they were freshmen, they had to fill out questionnaires asking about their sexuality. Here's Tessa Russell again.

Tessa Russell (08:17):

I was a psychology major and the few times we touched on LGBTQ people, it was touched on as being mental illness. I had in high school struggled with an eating disorder and those feelings kind of came back where I realized I couldn't control my attraction to women, but I could control how I dealt with food. And so my anorexia resurfaced with an incredible vengeance. When you're restricting your food intake, one of the first things that shuts down is your libido. And so for me my anorexia was very much away from me to "fix" my queerness because the more I restricted, the less feelings I felt for women. And in my head I was like, "Well, if this is a sin, I've figured out how to fix it." Near the end of the semester, it had just gotten to be too much and I had a suicide attempt.

Andrew Jenks (09:32):

Tessa went home and began counseling, but she says she didn't address the core issue. And when she got back to school the next semester, her health continued to decline.

Tessa Russell (09:44):

I started having some heart issues and I remember going to the doctor and my doctor ran some tests and came back and she looked at me and said, "Tessa if you don't get it together, you're not going to be here in a few months." And so I realized, "Okay, so what I'm doing right now it's not working. It's quite literally killing me."

Andrew Jenks (10:14):

As you might imagine, there weren't any resources at Liberty that Tessa felt safe turning to. Men on the other hand could reach out to Pastor Dane Emerick who ran what has been referred to as a gay conversion therapy program on campus for those who "struggled with same-sex attraction." Luke Wilson met with Dane Emerick for all four years of his time at Liberty.

Luke Wilson (10:44):

He made me feel incredibly welcome like I was valued. He made me feel I was someone who was worthy of his time. He didn't make me feel gross. He didn't make me feel sinful for being attracted to men, because he even said to me things like, "You're not a gay man. You are a son of God. You are a champion for Christ in Christ, and you are not defined by what you do or what men you're attracted to." The way that he framed himself as this paternal figure, this really tender nurturing man, it's part of the insidiousness of pastor Dane Emerick and also conversion therapy in general.

Andrew Jenks (11:30):

Luke says that much of Emerick's conversion therapy centered on how to become more masculine.

Luke Wilson (11:36):

Pastor Dane gave us tips to enter the world of men. If I wanted to become straight, I needed to enter the world of men first and live comfortably in that world. One of them was practice carpentry. And I was like, how very Jesus of you like, okay. Yeah if just do a little woodwork. But my favorite tip was that if I were to read the sports section of the newspaper, eventually you're going to start really enjoying sports and you're going to start really enjoying watching sports. And then you're going to start enjoying playing sports, which ultimately is going to allow you into that door that it's going to open to bring you into the world of men so as to become straight. Because at its core according to conversion therapy it's not a sexuality issue. It's a gender issue.

Luke Wilson (12:26):

We would read scripture together. We would pray together. It was always Pastor Dane praying for me, never me praying for myself, right? Which I think is very illustrative that he's the one who is interceding on my behalf. He's the one who is speaking for me, not the other way around. One he loses one's voice in conversion therapy and in this sense, he took my voice and he took it in some ways that direct access to the divine to God, which I find it incredibly telling because our voice didn't matter. Because our voice was and is a gay voice and gay voices don't matter within the church. Gay voices are not authentic categories of human identity. Luke in that equation didn't matter what mattered was the possibility of who Luke could be. When you're told over and over and over that what you've done is wrong, you start seeing that as habitual and then you start seeing that as part of your character. So it's then at that point shame where you think it's not that what I did was wrong, I as a person am wrong. I, as an individual am not good.

Luke Wilson (13:35):

And so when I thought about myself afterwards, I thought whenever I would slip up, I would look at a man and find him attractive, stare at him too long or whatever. I didn't just see that as a discrete action that happened once or twice or three or four times. I started seeing that as who I am because, well I am like newsflash, I am gay. But nonetheless, I thought that those individual actions were not just separate from me. Those weren't just things that happened in the past. Those are things that defined me as a person which then made me feel really bad about myself for a really long time.

Dr. Douglas Haldeman (14:11):

I've seen firsthand the damage that it does. People's health is at risk people's lives are at risk around these things, because that is how profound the damage that is done of course from conversion therapy, but from the entire social context that supports it.

Andrew Jenks (14:30):

Dr. Douglas Haldeman is the foremost authority on the detrimental effects of conversion therapy.

Dr. Douglas Haldeman (14:39):

On top of feeling terrible about being gay, they now felt terrible about not being able to be successful in conversion therapy. Why is the person unhappy about their same sex orientation to begin with? Probably because of the threat of losing their families, their communities of faith, everything that they've ever known. I mean, there's tremendous pressure. Let's just look at it logically. Here is someone born into a conservative Christian family who is told that there is one acceptable path in life, which is to marry someone of the opposite sex and have children and all of this other stuff. When that is viewed as the norm, how likely is it that someone is going to say, "Oh, you know what? I think I'll just mess everything up in my life and be gay." Is a ludicrous assumption, absolutely ludicrous. And so when people say, "Well, G, I think it's a choice." I say that is absolutely ridiculous.

Dr. Douglas Haldeman (15:49):

That's why it's been so important to us who are activists in this realm to support legislation and judicial action that limits the credibility of conversion therapists. Not just to protect the individuals involved, but to inform the public. These interventions, whatever you may call them, have no basis. In fact, they're not in any way scientifically validated as possible. And secondly, they are dangerous.

Luke Wilson (16:27):

The option that is presented to gays and evangelicalism is as framed as a choice, you choose to be gay therefore precluding the possibility of choosing also Jesus, right? Because those two in the evangelical imagination are mutually exclusive. You cannot be gay and be a Christian at the same time. If I choose homosexuality, I'm

forfeiting my relationship with God, which of course effectively is forfeiting one's place in eternity. And so there's this really strong way of keeping these folks in line with evangelical doctrine. Because if you don't abide by these teachings well, what's going to happen? You're going to hell. That's I think the enduring fruit of Liberty.

Andrew Jenks (17:17):

Tessa Russell went back into treatment for her eating disorder. And this time she began to accept who she was.

Tessa Russell (17:26):

And I called this friend that I had known in treatment, who I thought would be pretty accepting. And I call her up and I'm just like, "I think I'm gay." And she was like, "Okay, cool. Are you dating someone?" It was not a big deal. And to me, I was kind of like, "Oh my God, wait like, I'm not going to hell? Why are you not concerned about this?" I eventually started feeling like okay, I'm more comfortable coming out to people. And I slowly started coming out to a couple of close friends. No one at Liberty because I was very fearful of what the consequences of that would be. But at the same time, I was kind of searching for other people because I felt like I was the only one, but I kind of thought like, well maybe there's there's other people that are LGBTQ here.

Andrew Jenks (18:17):

Tessa was led to a secret Liberty student LGBTQ group. She couldn't believe there were others like her on campus.

Tessa Russell (18:26):

And I was kind of blown away. I was like, "Wait, there's 20 other gay people here. That's crazy." For a campus that has 15,000 students for me, I was like, "Oh my gosh. So many." I thought I was the only person I was like, "What other gay person would go to Liberty?"

Andrew Jenks (18:42):

Tessa went home that winter break and she met someone. Her name was Ash and they had an instant connection. And so they started dating, but Tessa knew she had to keep it a secret back at school.

Tessa Russell (18:56):

And then this one weekend I'm in my dorm and I hear a knock at the door and I was like, "Oh, that's interesting. Is anyone coming over? I didn't realize that." And it's her.

Andrew Jenks (19:08):

Ash had decided to surprise Tessa at her dorm.

Tessa Russell (19:11):

Anyone that's dated long distance knows when you finally see people in person it's

like, oh, it's just such a wonderful thing. And so I ordered some pizza and we were just watching The Office in the background. And we were really careful to kind of just make it look like, okay, so we're friends hanging out. I sat on a different couch and she sat on a couch across from me. And I assumed like, there's nothing really suspicious about that. We should be fine. And so my RA comes in she's like, "Who is this?" And I was like, oh, and I glance across the room just to make sure we're on the same page. And I was like, "Oh, this is just my friend. She's visiting from back home." And my RA goes, "Well, she's going to have to leave."

Tessa Russell (20:01):

I just was silent for a moment. And I was like, "What do you mean she's going to have to leave?" My RA was like, "Well, you guys, you can't be together." I was like, "Well, what do you mean? We can't be together? I have a friend of her it's perfectly acceptable to have a friend over and eat pizza. I don't think that's against the Liberty way." And she was like, "No, you guys are dating." In that moment, I was just so terrified. And she was like, "Well, I'm going to stay in this room until she leaves." And she just sits down on the couch and looks at us. I was just in shock. Is this really happening? My girlfriend Ash just had no idea what to do. She was like, "Oh," and we didn't feel we could communicate because my RA is just sitting there looking at us and not saying anything other than "You have to go."

Andrew Jenks (21:02):

Tessa says she had no place to go. So she texted her underground LGBTQ group. And within minutes she had 10 people offer her and Ash a place to stay. But shortly after they arrived at a friend's house, she got a phone call.

Tessa Russell (21:21):

And it's my RA. I answer my phone and I'm like, "Hello." And my RA was like, "Well, where are you?" And I was like, "What do you mean where am I? You told me to leave campus." And she was like, "Oh no, your girlfriend needs to leave campus. But you guys can't be together. You have to come back." And so I was like, "Oh, okay." I mean, I didn't know if that was something in their power like, do RAs have the power to someone to be back to campus upon their desire? And at that point I was just so terrified. I was like, "Whatever you tell me fine." And so I leave my girlfriend who had been there for just a few hours with this complete stranger on an air mattress, in a strange apartment in a city she's never been in and I feel terrible.

Andrew Jenks (22:16):

When Tessa arrived back at her dorm, her RA was waiting for her.

Tessa Russell (22:21):

And she's kind of doing that fake nice voice where it's like, "Hey so I'm sorry, I just had to call you back to your room. You know that you guys can't be together. It's a sin. But if you want you can get therapy for this kind of thing." And I was just like, this is unreal. And so she watches me walk back to my room to make sure I really go there. It was such a dehumanizing experience to have another peer just watch

me crawl into my bed to make sure I'm not with my significant other in the middle of the night. And I'm just laying there and I'm just so in shock and angry and hurt and betrayed because like I felt I had gone through so much to accept myself. And I was just in this completely hostile environment that was so unaccepting of LGBTQ people.

Tessa Russell (23:17):

And I was kind of torn like, do I finish my time at Liberty? Do I try to transfer? But then of course I started looking into transferring and no one wants to accept Liberty credits because my entire freshman year is Bible classes. I can't afford to just lose 20, \$30,000. And so I wanted to finish up there, but at the same time I was terrified.

Andrew Jenks (23:41):

Tessa stayed at Liberty and in the spring of 2019 she attended an LU for me too protest on campus along with some friends from the underground LGBTQ group.

Tessa Russell (23:56):

And I just remember standing on those steps and someone gave me a pride flag and I draped it over my shoulders. And I was like, "Oh my God, I think I'm coming out to my entire university right now." It was a terrifying but super empowering moment at the same time. And you know, we have all these students coming up like "What's going on? Don't you know this is a sin? God hates this. Don't you think you're going to hell." Just absolutely berating us. In that moment though it was so empowering to be like, you might have these beliefs about that, but there are other people that are in this college that feel differently, and we need to respect those people and be mindful of those spaces. We should not cause so much harm to students that they feel like they have to go to these extreme measures to hide themselves just like I had done.

Andrew Jenks (24:59):

Luke Wilson recently joined a class action lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education seeking to stop religious colleges and universities who actively discriminate against LGBTQ students from continuing to receive federal funding. As for Tessa, she graduated from Liberty last year. And as far as she knows, she was the first openly gay woman at Liberty University. It may not have been surprising at the Liberty that Jerry Falwell Sr. founded back in 1971. But for that to be true at an American university in 2020 is equal parts astonishing and heartbreaking. Tessa is now an advocate for those who are in the situation she was in and she and Ash are now engaged to be married. But there's one more thing that Tessa added. Another reason why she thinks she and Ash may have been treated the way they were.

Tessa Russell (26:06):

I do think because Ash is black and Liberty's population is very white and there's also a lot of honestly just blatant racism on campus, which is disgusting and horrifying. We do wonder if that did play a part because when you have a whole

dorm with a 100 some white girls, and then you have one black girl that no one's ever seen before, we do also kind of have to wonder did that play a part? Because Liberty is not a safe campus for people of color.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (26:59):

I want to start this off by reiterating how incredibly tragic this is. And we've got a lot of families that are clearly devastated by what happened here, and we need to be sensitive to that.

Andrew Jenks (27:12):

On December 2nd 2015, a married couple opened fire in an act of terrorism killing 14 people at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino California. Two days later Jerry Falwell Jr. Addressed an estimated 10,000 students at Liberty's convocation.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (27:34):

If some of those people in that community center had, had what I've gotten in my back pocket right now- is it illegal to pull it out? I don't know. Anyway, I've always thought if more good people had concealed carry permits then we could end those Muslims before they walk in and kill. I just wanted to take this opportunity to encourage all of you to get your permit. We offer a free course and let's teach them a lesson if they ever show up here.

Keyvon Scott (28:33):

When he said if the Muslims come here and when he put his hand on his holster, that's when the cheering started.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (28:41):

Thank you. And you're dismissed.

Keyvon Scott (28:43):

And I was looking at the people who were cheering mostly white people and my jaw has dropped. I was like, "Are you serious?"

Andrew Jenks (28:53):

Keyvon Scott was one of the students sitting in the arena during that convo.

Keyvon Scott (28:59):

It was really devastating to me and especially that applause and no one really holding him accountable for what he said. For this to be a Christian school and you just said that and especially about Muslims, why would anybody want to come to Liberty University? You're sitting here endorsing diversity when number one, there's no diversity on the campus. You're sitting here talking about Muslims and guns and why we should have guns on campus. Now, I'm definitely not going to feel safe as a black person because a white person's carrying gun and I could get shot.

Andrew Jenks (29:33):

Keyvon said that there were so few people of color on campus that he constantly got strange looks and was made to feel he didn't belong.

Keyvon Scott (29:44):

I didn't see anybody who looked me from the professors to the students. It was like something's really off here. That's how I felt walking into the classroom. They didn't say it, but their presence was made known that, "Hey, you're black."

Andrew Jenks (30:04):

Remember Jerry Falwell Sr. was a segregationist. And he preached against integration. Here he is speaking about when he had a change of heart.

Jerry Falwell Sr. (30:16):

But it was during that time that the holy spirit was dealing with me about bigotry, about my segregation's position, that mine was a racist position. And I got on my knees and asked God's forgiveness. And we accepted our first black family into the church. And I told the gentlemen as I was about to baptize them.

Andrew Jenks (30:35):

And though he apologized for the hurtful things he said later in life, this is the environment that Jerry Falwell Jr. was raised in. We asked the sources we've spoken to who were close with Falwell Jr., if he ever showed himself to be racist, many said no. But one of Jerry's former direct reports told us that he was touring a shopping center that Liberty owned with Falwell Jr. And his daughter Caroline when Jerry said to Caroline, how does it feel to be the daughter of the head N-word in charge? We were also told about the time that Jerry Falwell Sr. called Jr. to ask them how white the rocks were that were being used to form the giant letters LNU on the side of a mountain overlooking campus. Jr. told his father, they were as white as a KKK robe.

Andrew Jenks (31:36):

Jerry Jr. we were told was obsessed with the confederacy too. And when he had Liberty built an equestrian center, he named the new street it was built on Traveller Court, but Traveller is spelled with two Ls. We were told this was Jerry's deliberate decision because Traveller with two L's is the name and spelling of General Robert E. Lee's horse. Even Trey Falwell, Jerry's son has made insensitive remarks indicating that racist thinking may have passed along through three generations of Falwell's. When Barack Obama beat Mitt Romney to be reelected in 2012, Trey posted a message on Facebook, which read "It looks the presidential race will remain black." Lee Quan McLaurin known as Quan was a Liberty freshman that year.

Quan McLaurin (32:42):

This is a campus where people are flying their Confederate flags. People have no problem with doing that. I already was very much so aware that I was a black man, but it just became blaringly loud on that campus my freshman year. I will never forget praying to God and just saying, "God, I feel so lonely on this campus. Please

send me a friend.” My junior year and senior year, I definitely started to move away from God and my faith because I just was looking at all the people around me and I was just like, “These people are phony. These people are fake. They’re hateful, they’re bigoted, they’re racist and they are all claiming the name of Christ. And they are telling me that this is what my face is. They’re telling me that this is what my religion is and I just wanted nothing to do with it.” And I remember basically saying to God, like “If this is who your people are, I don’t want you.”

Andrew Jenks (33:48):

Although he was conflicted after, Quan graduated he took a job at the university and by 2020, he’d worked his way up to become the Director of Diversity Retention in the Department of Inclusion, Diversity and Equity. He wanted to help students who felt he did on a campus which counted Candace Owens as one of their diverse guest speakers.

Candace Owens (34:13):

There’s this an ideological civil war happening black people that are focused on their past and shouting about slavery and black people that are focused on their futures. Okay? That’s really what it comes down to. Okay?

Andrew Jenks (34:23):

Candace Owens is the far right conservative speaker who became a darling of Donald Trump’s after a video of her berating black protestors at UCLA went viral. She called them whiny toddlers.

Candace Owens (34:38):

Victim mentality is not cool. I don’t know why people being oppressed. The weirdest thing I’ve ever heard “I love oppression.” Oh, we’re oppressed, 400 years of slavery, Jim Crow, which by the way, none of you guys lived through, your grandparents did. And it’s embarrassing that you utilize

Andrew Jenks (34:50):

Of course, Owens herself is black. And she has called for black democratic voters to leave the party and become Trump supporters. Something she called Blexit. Quan McLaurin didn’t hide his disdain for Candace Owens and her message. But he was still asked by his boss, Greg Dowel to plan a school trip to go listen to Candace Owens speak at an event in Richmond.

Quan McLaurin (35:20):

He calls me into his office and he’s like, “I got a big project for you and this needs to happen. It’s come directly from Jerry, they have to get 50 predominantly black and brown students to go to this Blexit event that’s being put on by Candace Owens from Richmond. We have a week to put it on. It’s a directive from Jerry.” I’m like, “This is not something that I want to be a part of. This is not something I think our office should do.”

Andrew Jenks (35:46):

Quan was vocal in his protest to Greg Dowel and others. So you could imagine his surprise when he received an email advertising the event, and the email had been sent from Quan himself.

Quan McLaurin (36:00):

When you're planning a big event, you pay attention to every ding. And I got this ding on my phone and it was email from myself. I didn't send myself any notes.

Andrew Jenks (36:11):

Someone in Liberty's administration had sent out an email from Quan's account advertising the Candace Owens event.

Quan McLaurin (36:19):

And I'm like, who did this? It felt so sinister. I have never been so enraged. People after that incident took to social media to condemn me. I got private messages. I got emails. I had in-person conversations with students who were very much so upset at it and did not believe me when I told them that I had no involvement.

Andrew Jenks (36:50):

Quan says he'd considered handing in his resignation after that email was sent, but a colleague talked him out of it. The trip to the Candace Owens event in Richmond that Quan had to coordinate was just a few days later.

Candace Owens (37:06):

We have tons of white conservatives here and I've done a lot of speaking in front of groups and they say, "How do we talk to the black community? We've been seared as racist for so long. They're scared to even knock on our doors. They're scared to say they're Republican, they're scared to say they're conservative because they've been lied on and smeared." And I said

Quan McLaurin (37:21):

These students start showing up. They wanted a bus full of black and brown students. And they did not get that. Most of them are white girls and I think it spoke to the tone of the event and of the even idea or the movement of Blexit. Blexit is not for black people. Blexit is not for brown people. It's not for people of color. It is for white people to feel good about the idea that potentially black people join their cause and trying to entice them to join their cause. And they hand us all these shirts as we're coming in. And they're these Blexit shirts and they're neon colors and they're really bright. And they're like, "Oh, put it on. Put on the shirt, put on the shirt." And I take the shirt and I'm like, "Okay, thank you." And of course I'd never put on that stupid shirt.

Quan McLaurin (38:11):

To describe the scene is like, it's a dimly lit theater and you have all of these predominantly white people in these bright shirts that are yelling for black people

to leave the democratic party. Just the idea that they're yelling for black people to do anything it's so traumatizing. Unless you're there, it's hard to explain. It was so bad that one of my student workers had to leave because she just couldn't take it. She said it was too oppressive of an environment. The Blexit event was literally one of the most horrific events of my life. It was being in a Jordan Peele movie. You'd expect to see that and get out, but this was a real life.

Quan McLaurin (39:00):

There are all these white people around you yelling for you to do something and black people who are on stage who are clearly in a sunken place. Everyone's looking at you telling you what you should do and cheering you on like, ah, and it's scary. After that event I had to end up going to therapy.

Andrew Jenks (39:26):

Quan says the trauma he experienced at Liberty was constant and pervasive. His group was even moved to a smaller office so that Sarah Falwell, Trey's wife could take their space when she was hired as an employee. And then after Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor were killed in early 2020, George Floyd was murdered on May 25th and the country erupted in protest.

Group (39:57):

George Floyd. What's his name? George Floyd.

Andrew Jenks (40:00):

Of course, this was during the height of the COVID pandemic. And one day after George Floyd's murder, Ralph Northam, Virginia's Governor issued a mask mandate. The next day after that Jerry Falwell who'd already speculated whether COVID was "A Christmas present from North Korea," took to his Twitter feed to voice his disapproval.

News Announcer (40:25):

Now to a story that has many of you talking on our ABC13 Facebook page, Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr. is in hot water tonight after a recent tweet protesting the Governor's mask regulation. In the tweet, Falwell says he is adamantly opposed to the mandate of requiring citizens to wear face masks until he decided to make his own.

Andrew Jenks (40:50):

Falwell tweeted about Northam's mandate posting a photo of a mask that Falwell had made. The mask was printed with an image from Governor Northam medical school yearbook, which allegedly showed Northam dressed in a black face costume and next to another man dressed in a KKK costume. After first apologizing, Northam denied that it was him in the photo. Falwell captioned the tweet about the mandate writing "I will reluctantly comply, but only if this picture of Governor blackface is on it." When Falwell was called out for his racist and insensitive tweet, he doubled down later that day saying that he was only shining a spotlight on the

fact that the Democrats were the real racists.

News Announcer (41:38):

Maybe people of color would be offended by the tweets or do you want them to

Jerry Falwell Jr. (41:44):

No. They should be glad that I'm calling out a racist.

Andrew Jenks (41:46):

The reaction on campus was one of disbelief.

Thomas Starchia (41:51):

I remember thinking this can't be real. This can't be, this can't be. I honestly couldn't believe it.

Andrew Jenks (41:58):

Thomas Starchia was also a former Liberty student and became the Associate Director in Liberty's office of Spiritual Development.

Thomas Starchia (42:08):

I was hurt badly by that and that's when I knew that I couldn't continue to do my job anymore because it's a conflict of values. And I can't be in a place or even really be in the presence of someone or of a family who doesn't value me at all.

Andrew Jenks (42:32):

And here's Keyvon Scott again, who'd also taken a job with Liberty after he graduated.

Keyvon Scott (42:39):

It was painful for me, especially everything that happened. Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and then you put out this tweet and I'm still here trying to represent you and this school. It was painful on the inside, but on the outside I had to keep smiling and pretend like, oh, nothing's wrong? No, something's wrong. I just had nobody to talk to because nobody really cared in Lynchburg or at Liberty. It was heavy on my heart. And I was like, "I can't believe I'm working for Liberty University. I need to leave at this point."

Andrew Jenks (43:14):

Both Thomas and Keyvon resigned. Here's Jerry Falwell Jr. along with Becky laughing about his tweet on America this week with Eric Bolling. A show criticized for spreading misinformation about the Coronavirus.

Eric Bolling (43:33):

Tell us what you want to say to Governor Northam who's [crosstalk 00:43:38] to wear a mask Jerry.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (43:39):

Here we are three months in, I've got a mask printed up with a picture of him and his friend in blackface and KKK mask and I said, "Fine, starting Friday, we all have to wear a mask in Virginia." I said, "Fine. I'll reluctantly wear it, but only if it's got a picture of Governor blackface on the mask." So look at my Twitter and I hope everybody buys one.

Andrew Jenks (44:05):

As the Black Lives Matter Movement was gaining traction in the wake of the George Floyd murder, Quan McLaurin felt that it was important to post a message of support from Liberty University's social media channels, but he was repeatedly denied approval from the administration. So he decided to do it anyway and posted from the office of inclusion diversity and equity's Facebook account writing "Black lives matter," along with a caption containing six Bible verses supporting the slogan. Within an hour, a Liberty administrator removed the post. Quan finally reached his limit and resigned as well.

Quan McLaurin (44:53):

Up until that point I had decided I needed to stay because these students didn't have anyone advocating for them. I got to the point where I realized I could no longer tell black and brown students to come to this institution, tell black and brown parents to send their students to this institution that I knew would cause them harm and that I knew it wasn't taken a subsidy it should be to take care of their most prized possessions, their kids. And I cannot stress that enough. If parents care about their kids, then they should not be sending them to Liberty.

Andrew Jenks (45:30):

Quan's resignation came at a time when the negative reaction to Jerry's tweets was building. A group of 35 black alumni including ministry leaders and pastors, as well as former student athletes sent an open letter to Falwell urging him to resign. And so finally, two weeks after he sent out his initial tweet, Falwell made a public address from a Liberty office.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (45:58):

Everybody in the Liberty community who is African-American understood that I was targeting the Governor, but there was collateral damage and inadvertently when I was swinging at the governor, I advertently hit some people that love me. And that was the Liberty African-American community. And so therefore I apologize to the people that I never intended to hurt, but I'm never going to apologize to the governor. So, that's it.

Andrew Jenks (46:28):

Falwell is asked what kind of work he'll do in the community to show his sincerity and his answer tells you all you need to know.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (46:38):

Moving forward, we can do anything, any work in the community to help but educate people or show that you were sincere in your apology? Don't you see that college right there? Come on everybody, I'm doing plenty to educate people.

Andrew Jenks (46:53):

Falwell points over his shoulder and says, "Don't you see that college right there? I'm doing plenty to educate people."

Jerry Falwell Jr. (47:02):

I think people need to realize that people who have never experienced what African-Americans have experienced need to realize that there's sensibilities there that are easy to harm and to hurt. And they've lived what we've just read about in history books. And we've been told that it was just in Mississippi or whatever. And I think that's the most important lesson to take from, from all this. I remember growing up here in the 60s and back when there was racial unrest, African-Americans in Lynchburg had the sweetest spirit of any African-Americans I believe in the whole country. And I remember that as a kid, we were never scared to go downtown. It was just different than it is in the big cities today. And I'm so proud of my community because of that.

Andrew Jenks (47:59):

Jerry is asked if he has any final words to which he says, "Just admit I'm right."

Jerry Falwell Jr. (48:05):

Just admit I'm right. [crosstalk 00:48:12].

Speaker 18 (48:12):

Maybe for me to ask, when you said something about community change

Andrew Jenks (48:14):

Jerry then invites Becki Falwell to say something. And she reminds him of the decision that he just made to not have classes anymore on Martin Luther King Day, a national holiday. Jerry says he'd never thought about it until Greg Dowell, Quan's former boss mentioned it to them.

Jerry Falwell Jr. (48:33):

The first thing he was telling me today. So Jerry could we stop having classes on Martin Luther King Day? And I say "Of course, nobody ever asked me that before." All you got to do is ask. Nobody said, well just say okay, let's do it. A lot of it is people just don't ask. And so ask and you shall receive.

Andrew Jenks (48:59):

Liberty University stood by Falwell's apology, Jerry Prevo, then chairman of Liberty's board and now school president said, "Know him and know him not to be a racist, nor do we believe that he has been running Liberty University in a way that discriminates against African-Americans." According to the AP citing internal

documents it received liberties on campus black population went from 13% in 2007 when Jerry Falwell Jr. took over as president to just 5% in 2019. Only two of Liberty's 28 executives currently listed on the school's website are black. Liberty's apparent discrimination, plus the outright prohibition on relationships outside of a "Natural born man and woman," written into the Liberty way, maybe more than just bad practice. It may break Virginia State Tax Law too. In 2003, a state law went into effect, which prohibits organizations that have "Any rule, regulation, policy or practice that unlawfully discriminates on the basis of religious conviction, race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin from receiving property tax exemption."

Andrew Jenks (50:32):

We found at least seven applicable pieces of Liberty owned property where according to the law and liberty's apparent discrimination against its LGBTQ and BIPOC community, it would seem that they should have been subject to taxes on those properties. These properties account for at least \$5.8 million of lost tax revenue for the city of Lynchburg. We asked Liberty University several questions related to this episode. Has Liberty stance towards its LGBTQ students changed in recent years? Does the school still offer a gay conversion therapy on campus? Why didn't the school condemn Falwell Junior's racist tweet? And what actions has Liberty taken to ensure that the university is a welcoming place for people of color in the wake of Falwell Junior's behavior. By now, you can probably figure out the answer. We received no response to any of our questions.

Andrew Jenks (51:54):

In our final episode of the season

Speaker 19 (51:57):

There are some evangelical leaders right now who have been a part of this movement for decades who are now saying, what have we done? What have I been a part of?

Andrew Jenks (52:08):

We'll take a look at where Liberty goes from here.

Speaker 20 (52:12):

Would I be surprised if Jerry Jr. comes back in some capacity in the future? No, not at all because this is the broken pattern of Christian institutions.

Speaker 21 (52:22):

If we're a Christian school and faith is our mission, then why are we putting politics and political partisanship time and time again before our Christian values?

Andrew Jenks (52:32):

And we'll take a much deeper look at the people who've enabled Jerry Falwell Jr. for all this time. Liberty's board of trustees.

Thomas Starchia (52:42):

Jerry's gone, but the same board who by virtue of their actions, they may lack character as well and trustworthiness. And yet they're still in charge. The best thing that Liberty could do is replace that entire board and try to start a new.

Speaker 22 (53:00):

Liberty needs to clean house if it has a chance of becoming a reputable Christian school.

Andrew Jenks (53:07):

If you have any tips about Jerry Falwell Jr., or Liberty University, you can contact us at tips@gangstercapitalism.com. We can ensure anonymity. This has been a creation and presentation of C13 Originals, a Cadence13 Studio. Executive produced by Chris Corcoran, Zak Levitt, and myself. Written, produced and directed by Zak Levitt, produced by Perry Crowell and myself. Research and production support by Ian Mandt. Editing by Perry Crowell and Bill Schultz. Mixed and mastered by Bill Schultz. Production coordination by Terence Malangone. Studio coordination by Sean Cherry. Art work in design by Curt Courtenay. Marketing by Brian Swarth, Josefina Francis and Melissa Wester. And PR by Hillary Schupf. Original music by Joel Goodman and our Your Sins Will Find You Out by Eli Paperboy Reed.

Andrew Jenks (54:30):

(singing)