



Episode 1

Matt's Story: The Road Home

Craig: Welcome to the Robertson and Easterling podcast. Thanks for listening. I'm Craig Robertson.

Matt: And I'm Matt Easterling. Craig and I are board certified Family Law specialist or simply, we're professional storytellers. Together we run one of the most successful boutique law firms in Mississippi.

Craig: As divorce lawyers, we are creative problem solvers who work with real people during the most difficult seasons of their lives. So, sit back, relax, take a deep breath. Everything's going to be okay. You found us and what you're about to hear is going to help.

Alright, so our Guest today is my good friend Matt. Matt is around 40 years old, he has been married around 20 years. He has two teenage children and he's a small business owner. He had spent about 10 or 15 years in the corporate world and found himself in a place where he needed to come and seek some legal help. And so, Matt, thanks for taking time with us today to talk about this.

Guest: Well, thank you for having me. I'm excited about this opportunity to share my story and my experience and hope that somebody can glean something from it.

Craig: So, let's just dive right in and what was going on in your life that led you to reach out to us for legal help.

Guest: My life was in the middle of chaos and crisis. My wife and I were working through counseling and going through just the steps and for me, unfortunately, the motions of trying to repair our marriage that I had destroyed. Honestly, I had an inappropriate relationship with another woman and was able to come clean about that relationship about, I would say six months before I came to see you guys and tried to do what I could do to in that relationship and then also try to repair mine that what I found was that I did not believe that reconciliation was possible. My wife actually forgave me and said that she wanted to work on our marriage. And the crazy thing was I just couldn't believe that that was something that could happen.

Craig: If that happened, that is the discovery of an inappropriate relationship, six months before you ever landed in our office. Why did you wait? Why did it take six months to come in and get legal help? What changed that inspired you. Okay, look, I need to go in and talk about what's going on to a lawyer.

Guest: Yeah, I think what happened was, I was giving it the old college try. I mean, I was trying to work it out or at least I thought I was. And we were going to counseling like I said and things were good and then things were bad and it just kept going back and forth for me and what it was, it was an inability to get both feet in and for me to really be committed to that relationship. And it finally came to a head one day in counseling and I told her, I said, "Go get an attorney". This is not working and she was upset and I wound up actually moving out of my house. So, I move into a little crappy apartment. About 15 minutes from my home and now I've got two children and a wife that are, you know, desperate for me to come home and figure it all out and I'm out. Just running wide open away from all that because I'm so scared and I'm lying in bed and this again, crappy apartment going something, this is terrible. And I need to do something. I'm also very fearful at that time that, you know, I'm not going to be able to see my kids and I've got the wrong people talking to me telling me that, you know, you need to protect yourself, you need to make sure that, you know, she doesn't get everything or whatever. And I just wanted out. Honestly, I just wanted to run away from the problem, which, unfortunately, was me so I was running with it.

Matt: Do you recall how long you had been wrestling with the idea of calling an attorney or coming in and seeing somebody before you actually did?

Guest: I think it was probably about a year. Honestly, I mean it was... So, even before discovery, you know, I'm in the middle of my affair and I'm contemplating how to get out of my marriage and go be with a fair partner or go be single because I have created this monster in my mind that is my wife. I mean, honestly, just from having the inappropriate relationship and then measuring what is ultimately a fantasy world and measuring my wife by that fantasy world, I began to just resent her, like crazy and resent her for no reason. She's an incredible lady. But yeah, I mean, over a year, probably just thinking about it, but never, never ever really getting serious about it. Just kind of living in that fantasy world.

Craig: Let's talk a little bit about the day you actually came in, because I remember the day that you came in, I can remember specifically, there's some images that I talked to clients about and I've been using for 20 years now. One is the image of two mountains. And that a person who comes to see me is at base camp is what I would like to say. And they have two peaks, they can either try to ascend and one is the peak of reconciliation. And one is the peak of the divorce two equally difficult journeys. One leads to restoration; one leads to a new life that for some people is the right decision.

So, I remember talking to you about that specifically. And also remember another picture that I drew about, you know, there's a common misconception that half of marriages fail, but that's not actually true. Well, it is true, but it's not half of first marriages. Actually, most first marriages work out. It is the second and third and fourth marriages that have a higher failure rate. And that's basically because there's more people involved. I draw the little picture that so your world was you and your wife and your two children, but if you divorce and you add a new spouse who may or may not have an ex who may or may not have children and just basically if you start drawing the little stick figures, they're just way more people to get along and to create difficulty because look, managing children, managing finances, managing work, all that is hard and the more people that are involved in it can add to the difficulty. So, let's talk specifically about I mean, before you walked in the door, how did you feel? What do you remember about that first interaction with me and Matt Easterling?

Guest: So, I've always known what you've done for a living and I knew that you were going to be available if I needed you. And when I was walking in that day, I was pretty desperate with a thought of there's a possibility I might not be able to see my kids there's a possibility that I might not be able to afford to live so that I can make sure that my kids are okay.

And I wanted to come in and just get an idea of Hey, I've got this fantasy and I've got a lot of stories in my head but what does divorce really look like? And that was something that you and Matt did wonderfully and yeah, those two pictures were very helpful is to paint. You guys painted a clear picture of what divorce would look like and help me make a more informed decision about, hey, what am I run into and the picture of the mountains? Yeah, that one was impactful, but not as impactful as the picture of the multiple families.

That was a big deal. I remember you saying, hey, right now you've got four people to worry about. And then if divorce comes along, you could potentially have eight. Let's add another second marriage to another one. And then you've got 10 I mean, who knows how many families you're going to have to try to keep happy and the road home look Like the road that I wanted to travel the mountain that I wanted to climb. And I guess, you know, I was saying earlier that fear was what ultimately drove me out of my house. But then there was a greater fear of what's on the other side, you know, that grass looked really, really scary, honestly, on the other side of the fence.

Craig: So, what did you do? So, you came, you got information? I remember, quite frankly, you were harder on yourself about what your future would look like upon divorce than probably the legal reality was, but notwithstanding that reassurance, I believe from me and Guest, about what your future could look like upon divorce, each other's reconciliation and moving toward reconciliation. Anyway, talk about that a little bit about what you walk out of our office. You've been what I like to say armed with information, you've got a more realistic legal picture of what your future could be like, as a divorced person. What happened then?

Guest: Yes, so you guys painted a realistic financial picture for me. I think a lot of people probably on the way out, especially when you may be the perpetrator, so to speak, you just want out and you want to leave everything behind and you just want to escape. And I remember coming in here going, just give her everything. And you guys going well, it's not going to be just like that. That's not exactly how the law works.

And then having that reality of wait a minute. Yeah, so if I can't leave everything behind, who am I hurting? I'm hurting my kids. I'm about to take that out of the house, but then I'm about to say, Hey, I know by the way, you can't even live in that house anymore, because you're not going to be able to afford it because I'm taking half of everything and it was just, it was a picture of destruction that I did... I had already created enough damage. This was going to be the final blow that would just destroy my family as it was.

Craig: Right. So, what I'm hearing you say is I think there's a common misconception about people who are the one at fault in the marriage or the one more at fault in a marriage because I don't think there's any marriage whereby neither party has some level of responsibility because we're all broken, we all make mistakes, we're all less than perfect. But in your case, what I'm hearing you say is almost felt guilty about the law not punishing me as much as I thought the law should because there was a lot of shame around your mistakes, a lot of self-persecution, if you will around your mistake.

Guest: Yes, definitely. So, Shame was driving this bus for me. It was putting me to bed at night and waking me up every morning and it was dictating all of my decisions. I was so ashamed of what I had done, I was so ashamed of my... just what I had done in my family and having that inappropriate relationship and I wanted I just wanted to go hide man. I just wonder run away and hide and yeah, so what that looked like for me was, hey kids, don't worry, everything's going to be fine, everything's going to be like normal. I'm just going to take myself out of the picture. And that's just one reality.

Matt: Did the consultation process well did it end up being like you expected it would be? Is it easier, harder, scarier, more comforting than you thought. What?

Guest: Yeah, I would say, if you want to say, easier, probably, you know, just... it was a clear cut. You know, this is what you guys do, you know how it works. And you laid it out for me very... what I thought was very clear. So, going back, you know, yeah, it helped me make a real informed decision. And you guys were easy to talk to Craig's illustrations, which is, you know, helping me visualize what those that the family dynamic would look like, help me visualize the mountains that I'm about to try to climb either way and you know, the road home is it look like the easier road or at least it was the more-worthy road. How about that not the easier because it's been very difficult, we're actually two years removed right now from having that conversation with you guys

Craig: Talk about that road home. What did it look like for you? So, you walk out of our office? What happened then?

Guest: I walk out of the office and I'm just... there's no way that I'm going forward with divorce. There's... I just, I can't do it. I can't do it to my kids. My parents are divorced. My parents have been divorced since I was four. I remember what it's like to bounce back and forth to houses. I remember what it's like to have two Christmases and two birthdays and to try to keep those two households happy. That was something that was really, really impactful to me again and so I leave here going, I'm not doing that to my kids.

I don't know what it looks like. I don't know how I'm going to fix this. But I need help and the help started here with the reality check. And then from there it was, I went home, had a conversation with my wife and said, I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go, I don't know how to make this happen, but I need to do something. And she said, Well, maybe you need to go somewhere. Maybe you need to go up to a place where you can spend some time and get away and that land to me at the ranch in Tennessee.

Craig: Talk about that. What's the ranch? And how did you end up? What was the process for going? How did you step away from your life for the period of time necessary to go and you know, what impact has it had on you today here, you know, two years removed from being there?

Guest: The ranch was the best thing that I've ever done for myself in my entire life. 28 days of being away from everything else and just focusing on me and having people pour into me and having people talk to me and speak truth into me. It was just it was an environment that was so healing. So, the ranch is a mental health and addiction facility that, you know, takes care of people who are struggling with heroin to sex addiction. I mean, it's the whole gamut and then people who are just depressed or who have eating disorders, it didn't matter. I mean, the crazy thing that I learned while I was at the ranch is that all of that comes back to a core, which is the

person, this image of self, we medicate with drugs because of how we feel about ourselves. We don't eat and starve ourselves because of how we feel about ourselves and the truth is that my inappropriate relationship and my destructive behavior, had everything to do with how I felt about myself and my desire to have someone else or something else. Make me feel better. So, crazy enough, I'm in a place with heroin addicts and guys who, you know, almost died and alcoholics and in the within three days of being in a place like that it's pretty scary at first but then all sudden you look around go these are... that guy is me, that guy right there is me and they just have a different vice or a different way of escaping the reality that they can't stand to look at anymore

Craig: Yeah, you're not an expert on this subject but I'm interested and I think our listeners would be interested in your feedback on it because I think there is a specifically in the church that sexual sin or sexual brokenness gets categorized as addiction. So, and in some cases, that's certainly true. There certainly is, although it's not in the fancy psychologist book called the DSM4 or DSM5 now. Most experts would agree that there is sexual addiction and it does exist. But some other people would say, well, that's just an excuse to look at porn or to have affairs or anything, you know something like that. So, what have you learned about sexual addiction? Specifically, if anything,

Guest: I mean, if anybody has experienced the first kiss, or the first time you ever made love, or I mean that you can't tell me there wasn't some kind of physical response or that would, I think would rival any drug that's out there. So, the desire to have that feeling over and over again. I mean that sounds like addiction to me. You know,

Craig: It's funny that you say that there's a counselor out, for a few years I had an office over in Meridian, Mississippi, and there was a counselor over there. She was a light counselor, but she was lovely human being. And she would tell me say, Craig, the strongest drug known to man is strange-nucky

Guest: Yeah, it's a pretty powerful drug, I'll tell you, but there's a much more powerful drug out there. And that's acceptance and grace man. It's an incredible feeling when you can finally accept who you are, and then have other people and believe that they accept you, which was what I've experienced. So, you know, you mentioned the Christian world in this idea of addictions and things like that. What was unique and great about being at the ranch was, there were no believers there. Like, none of them.

Craig: I was going to ask you that was it? I didn't know if the ranch was a faith-based facility or not, or how faith and a lot of times we, as believers, we, you know, we can see God in, you know, places where other people don't. One of my favorite books is and I recommend it to a lot of my clients is called "The Artists Way" by Julia Cameron. And it's a real book about rediscovering creativity and there. I don't think the word God is in it. But you cannot read it without getting a sense of the Creator God and the higher power.

Cassie: Hey guys, I'm your new friend Cassie. I'm a paralegal and the client care coordinator, Robertson and Easterling. Are things not working out for you at home? I am so sorry. What you need right now is honest feedback and last council about how the legal system works in Mississippi and how it could impact your future, click on the link on our website or just give me a call. After meeting with one of our attorneys, you'll feel like the weight of the world has been lifted from your shoulders and you'll have guidance about what you need to do next. When

you're ready to talk, just give me a call. I would love to talk to you. The fact that he even spoke to me it's totally confidential. Until then, take care and enjoy the second half of our show.

Craig: So, there were no believers there.

Guest: No, there weren't but the big book was there. You know the 12-step book was there and it talks about that higher power and everybody was okay with that higher power. The piece for me though about the believers and not being there was that these people were loving on me, caring for me and they weren't reading a book that told them that they should. You know there's a lot of times you'll get some love from believers or Christians or whatever you want to call them and it's like wow, that you're supposed to, you're loving me because you're supposed to...

Craig: Right out of obligation

Guest: Absolutely. So, and when someone like myself who was really struggling with this idea of loving myself and believing that anyone else could possibly love me to go to that environment where they did and where they truly cared and nurtured my spirit it was nice, it took down all the walls of potential well, that's your job or this is why you do it, the people who served me the most while I was at the ranch with the other patients are the other guys that were struggling

Craig: So, what I've heard in your story, at least this piece of your story you came in, divorce is not for me. I'm going to do my best to climb the mountain of reconciliation to continue along that analogy. Your wife looks at you and like, Well, look, we've done all we can do here. So, why don't you go try to find a place you did, you went and you said it was a concentrated 30-day period of time while you are working on yourself. That is the biggest thing that you've ever done for yourself and your own personal healing and growth. So, what was your biggest takeaway?

Guest: My biggest takeaway was that I was lovable and not lovable because of what I do for someone or to someone I was just lovable period. And then I was able to start loving myself and then I was able to believe that someone else could love me while I was at the ranch, my wife, she has a conversation with a fair partner and learned about everything. And she... we can only make phone calls once every three days or two days and for like 20 minutes so one of the first phone calls was, "I know everything" and then I've got not a prison guard but one of the one guy they're going all right somebody off the phone.

So, hang up the phone and have to live with oh crap, she knows everything. And that was a wonderful thing that needed to happen to me because then I was fully known, I could hide nothing at that point and by hiding or by being fully known and then still being accepted at that point, then yeah, there's no denying, you know, all my junk, you know, everything there is to know about me, it's on the table and you still okay with me? Wow.

And that's what I came home to. I came home to a wife who knew it all and was willing to continue to work and that was the probably that six-month time from disclosure to the time I came to see you guys, that just never happened. There were more secrets that existed there were more... gosh if she knew this then she wouldn't be sitting on this therapist couch with me. Or gosh, if she knew this we wouldn't be talking right now. So, when she did that, it was just it was, wow, now you get home and it's hard. I mean that's really where the work began. Because at the ranch you know, you can... you're still just there following somebody else's instructions but you come home and you face the people that you have hurt.

And for me it was... that was the hardest part was coming home and seeing that but then it's also the most rewarding and beautiful part about it was being home and saying here I am and I've got nothing to lose because it was all gone anyway. And it just it's been a beautiful, difficult road to redemption but my wife and I if she was in here, she'd tell you we have the best relationship and it's better than it's ever been in 20 years of marriage, 25 years of knowing each other, we really know each other and we really love each other.

Craig: Man, that's a beautiful, beautiful story. I do want to talk around one piece, you know, you hear... I've got tons of counselor friends. That's just kind of like, you know, I guess I run in those circles, but I hear them say, you know, you're only as sick as your secrets.

Guest: Absolutely.

Craig: And yours, that set you free. But I think a lot of people, men and women are afraid that those secrets that those things shared in counseling; those things shared in vulnerable moments will be weaponized against them. And I think that's certainly the fear of vulnerability. I'm an enneagram geek and so I'm an eight on the enneagram and I'm a challenger and I'm vulnerability challenged. That's great for your divorce lawyer not so great for your husband or father and but I'm growing like everybody else.

And you know, that's a hard place that vulnerability which creates the connection that's necessary for a truly rewarding, sustainable relationship because a lot of people stay married with their freaking miserable and we don't promote divorce, you know, we promote helping people where they are. And I think you're a testimony to that you came in and we analyze where you are. And you took that information and went and made a beautiful redemptive story, but talk around that piece a little bit that weaponizing of vulnerability, if you will.

Guest: It sounds easy; it sounds beautiful but it's very hard. And I don't think I don't think I would have done it if I wasn't forced to do it. There's just something about sharing. You're right, you're as sick as those secrets. And now it's trickling them out a little bit at a time.

And she was accepting a little bit of time, which was just gosh, it was just wounding her over and over again. I feel so horrible for that. But yeah, if she didn't have that conversation with a fair partner while I was at the ranch, I don't know at that time. I mean, today, it's wow, I'm so free. But at that time, I don't know if I'm just openly going to say, here's everything, I need you to know everything. So, yeah, vulnerability, it is the most-free and beautiful way to live. And being fully known and accepted is amazing. But yeah, it's hard. I don't know too many people who are willing to do it.

Craig: Is there a particular moment that you can reflect on over the last two years while you've been on this reconciliation journey? That is particularly memorable Were you looked over at your wife and said, "Gosh, I'm glad we didn't miss this".

Guest: The hope man, there's plenty of them. But I guess the one that sticks out the most is we were fortunate enough to have my daughter she got a big accolade at her school. And were there and it was just this beautiful family moment for all of us. And yeah, she and I are watching her celebrate and with all her friends and her community and we just look at each other and go, this wouldn't be like this. We would be on opposite sides of this room right now. If we didn't put in the work and God, thank you for putting in the work with me. Thank you for being here with

me. This could look really different. And it does and it was it was a really beautiful moment for us, and that was that moment you're talking about?

Craig: Yeah, that's really cool. One thing, we're almost out of time and I want to hear from my law partner over here as well, a couple of his closing thoughts. But one piece that I wanted to talk with you a little bit about, and you mentioned it was your experience as a child or an adult now, whose parents were divorced, talk around that just a little bit what, you know, what was your experience? I know your parents were divorced when you were really little. And so it's kind of all you've ever known. Talk about that.

Guest: Yeah. So, you know, four years old. I don't have a memory of my parents ever being together. Unless they were in the same room fighting over something to do with me. And that was... that's just not a good place to be for a kid because that kid begins to believe that I am the cause of pain, I am the problem. And I began to manage and with it, forgive me for using recovery words, but I begin to manage all the people around me I began to just Hey, I can make this person happy, I can make this person happy, I can hide these feelings. And I started to hide and that hiding behavior began really early. And I got really good at it. If you go to mom's house and experience something good, then when you come home to Dad, you can't tell him about it because it might hurt his feelings as you don't want him to know that you could be happy somewhere else.

And the same thing when you had a good time with a dad's house, and then you go to mom and so it was just a... it was an environment that looked good from the outside. Man, everybody around me, I remember I experienced a lot of love from a lot of people besides my parents. They were always you know, hey, it's okay. You're going to you know and really what was happening to me was, I wasn't able to trust my feelings. I wasn't able to... I don't think I was able to really be sad.

To have that sad moment where I am sad my parents are divorced. It was, "It's okay, this happens to lots of kids, this is you know, you got two Christmases, you get two birthdays, you get to everything" and that's just not that's not where a kid wants to be, you know, I'll take one Christmas. That's plenty. So, that environment for me was, you know, it was damaging. I didn't realize how bad it was and I'm not mad at them for that but that you can't you just can't deny the damage that comes from divorce.

Craig: Yeah, so divorce obviously happens. So, my last though, what advice would you give as an adult child of divorced people, as someone who is at base camp, if you will, but chose the path of reconciliation? What do you what do you tell parents who are recently divorced or contemplating divorced as it relates to their children?

Guest: I would say that, never forget that your ex is that child's parent. And you are that child's parent. And it's really, really hard for a child to hear something negative about their parent. And just be really careful about what you say about them. And then remember that it's okay to be sad and give them space to be sad, because it's a sad time. It's not a joyous occasion for little people who are experiencing a complete world change.

Matt: So, if I'm hearing you right, you didn't feel like sugarcoating it was helpful. The whole thing about the two Christmases.

Guest: No way.

Matt: And, you know, I feel like I've been doing this a long time now. I've never actually heard that perspective on it. And that really resonating with me at the moment,

Craig: We hear that all the time, children are resilient and they are.

Guest: Yeah.

Craig: And you know and most kids are okay, but at the same time we, you know, our identity is created in part by our mom and our dad. And you can't deny that I'm a reflection of my father to a certain degree and I'm a reflection of my mother to a certain degree. So, if somebody is telling me that my mom is bad, she's a drunk or a drug addict or crazy. I can't help but internalize that as being a...

Matt: Part of me.

Craig: A reflection of me.

Guest: Absolutely. I mean that the same mouth that says, I hate your father also says, You're just like your father. Right? And that goes, well then you must hate me.

Matt: Yeah. And no child should ever have to feel like they need permission to love their both parents to love them equally. And, you know, to take that out on your child because they do what comes most naturally in the world, which is love both their parents...

Guest: Sure.

Matt: It's one of the worst things that I feel like see in this world. I wish I knew how to completely fix it.

Craig: Yeah, I know custody cases are necessary. And but I'll tell you, having done them now for 20 years, I certainly leave a little bit of my soul in the courtroom and sometimes they're just flat necessary. Sometimes you have to do it. Because you know, you can justify, well, look, I'm not going to pay \$10,000 to say \$5,000 that doesn't make any sense. But can I justify spending \$10,000 to make sure that my child is safe, I mean, oh, yeah, absolutely. And so that I think that is the most complicated piece about what we do.

And you know, the childhood is such a fleeting time. I mean, my kids are teenagers now. And I mean, dude, there's not much good about Facebook, but one thing good about Facebook is it'll show you those flashbacks, you know, like, here's what you were doing seven years ago. I'm like, holy cow. I mean, I don't even probably recognize them. So, with those thoughts, what else do you have for us today?

Guest: Well, you mentioned that children are resilient? And I would say yes, children are resilient. But I think children are survivors. And, you know, one of the survival mechanisms or behaviors is to comfort yourself. And I think that can take you through the rest of your life when you find inappropriate coping mechanisms to comfort yourself or outlets to comfort yourself. And I think, you know, so yeah, they're resilient. But wow, careful, they're survivors. But wow, careful. And, you know, just love them. And just know that they're being impacted as well.

Craig: Well, dude, thank you for sharing with us for being so vulnerable. You're just being so real. Because I think that our listeners that's what they want is real. I mean, you know, I tried to tell people, you know, I try to analyze things from all the way around and some aspects of family

law are just ugly. And thank you for showing the redemptive piece of that. I think we all want a story of redemption. And sometimes that looks like reconciliation. And sometimes that looks like, you know, taking the broken pieces of our life and piecing it back together to create this beautiful work of art, a mosaic, if you will. So, thank you for sharing your mosaic with us.

Guest: Thank you, thanks for having me. You know my wife and I; we have a new marriage. So, yeah, you're right, it was broken and now it's a new marriage for us and it's beautiful. I'm grateful.

Matt: That's fantastic. Thank you.

Craig: You've been listening to the Robertson and Easterling podcast. Thanks for spending time with us.

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Craig: Have a great rest of your day. And remember, there's nothing wrong with arming yourself with information. On behalf of Matt and our entire team. Thanks for listening.

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