

Bruce James Interview

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SPEAKERS

Interviewee: Bruce James

Interviewer: Laura Sicari

Laura Sicari

Hi. This is Laura Sicari, it is March 19, 2024, at 10am. I'm with Bruce James via the online zoom platform. And we're going to begin our oral history interview for the University of Baltimore stories, the 100th Anniversary Oral History Project. The purpose of this project is to celebrate the University's Centennial by preserving the memory of those influenced by the University of Baltimore. Over the years, we will be creating a digital archive and exhibit and making these recordings available online. So hello, Bruce, nice to meet you.

Bruce James

Nice to meet you as well. Thank you for having me.

Laura Sicari

Yeah. So, I see here that you are a law enforcement officer. Is that for the City of Baltimore?

Bruce James

It's actually federal. So currently, I serve as a Federal Law Enforcement Officer with the US Courts, for the District of Maryland. I've been in this role since 2009. And I've been a federal law enforcement officer in total for 22 years. I actually started out in Washington, DC at a federal law enforcement office. And I worked there from 2000 to 2009. And in August of 2009, I came over to the US Courts for the District of Maryland. And that's the position that I currently hold today.

Laura Sicari

Okay, so you go to work in Maryland? I take it.

Bruce James

Yeah, so my base office is in Baltimore. So, I work in downtown Baltimore, but we also have a satellite office that's in Greenbelt. So, a lot of my work goes between Baltimore [Baltimore City, Maryland] and Greenbelt for the cases that we supervise.

Laura Sicari

Okay, and you are an alumnus of University of Baltimore.

Bruce James

Ah yes. So, I got my undergraduate degree from the University of Maryland, in College Park in the year 2000. And probably, I'd like to say that I received my master's in criminal justice from the University of Baltimore, in the Spring of 2020.

Laura Sicari

Congratulations. So that's recent. Um, so I would like to actually go back in time, to some questions about early life, and then we can kind of move along chronologically, and I can we can talk more about your career is that does that work? It's perfect. So where were you born? And when were you born?

Bruce James

So, I was born in Harvey, Louisiana. It's a city that's about seven miles outside of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana. I was born in 1976. So probably I'm 48 years old, almost 50. And yes, so I lived in Louisiana until I came to the University of Maryland in 1994. And I've been living in Maryland ever since.

Laura Sicari

Okay! What was it like growing up in Louisiana?

Bruce James

Extremely hot. So, I hate the winters. But I love the summer. I love the summer months. But my life in Louisiana. I'm the youngest of two kids. I have an older sister. She's four years older than I am. And had two parents, my mom and dad, Bruce Sr. [Senior] and Judith James, were wonderful parents. My childhood growing up was extremely, I'd say, packed, busy and full of fun. I come from a huge family in Louisiana.

So, we gather a lot. On the weekends we get together and have family meetings every Sunday or Saturday. And my life was just really busy. My mom was a school administrator for 35 years. And my dad served as he was a corrections officer for youth detention centers in Louisiana. So, they were extremely busy, but always found time to, I guess pour into myself and my older sister. They kept us busy and sports, always stressed that we did well in school, academically.

So, they were really involved, and supported everything we wanted to do. And I was a busy kid, I always love to play sports. So, I played football, I ran track, played basketball and baseball. So, yearround, there was something for them to do in terms of always bringing me to school, coming to my events, whether it's practices or games, so they were extremely busy, but at the same time extremely proud of the kids. We were.

Laura Sicari and is the area that you grew up in rural suburban urban.

Bruce James

Oh, no, it's urban. So again, I'm seven minutes from downtown New Orleans. So, Bourbon Street is the one I guess landmark that I could give people. I grew up seven minutes from Bourbon Street. So, for locals I rarely went on Bourbon Street because I've seen it all my life but whenever college buddies or coworkers go to New Orleans, they always asked me to go down and show him around so I'm always willing to do that. But the area that I grew up in was urban lot of my city itself, I grew up in Gretna, Louisiana, which is five miles outside of downtown New Orleans.

So, we always classed ourselves as being from New Orleans. But my city was really big, but close knit. When my parents weren't there to look after me if they were working my neighbors, we came from a close-knit community. So, my neighbors would always be willing to help, whether I'd be home and may not have had food to eat. Because my mom or dad may not have had time to cook it. I can always go to my neighbors, and they will provide food for myself and my friends. So, it was a real community unit. And that was something that I would hold is always appreciated about where I grew up.

Laura Sicari

What was the transition from New Orleans to College Parkway? Do you? You moved directly to College Park to go to college?

Bruce James

Yes. So, um, I received an athletic scholarship to go to the University of Maryland, I played football. So, I'll never forget, it was February 2, 1993. I remember the date. It was my first time flying. So, I got on the plane, got to Maryland, of course, there was snow on the ground. So, I remember getting off the plane come in, and one of the coaches picked me up. And as soon as I saw the ice, the snow and ice on the ground, I slipped and fell. So that was my introduction to cold weather, right. So, my transition, I'd say was culture shock at first.

So, during my freshman year at the University of Maryland in 1994, I wasn't used to being far away from home, I was 1100 miles away from home, I was missing my mom, missing my dad, missing my family members. And on top of that I had to perform academically and athletically. So, when you couple of being home sick with having to perform in the classroom, and in sports, it made that first semester but

also that first year really challenging. But again, my mom, dad; my support system with my sister, they always supported me. And they would fly up just about every month to come and check on me and bring me some home cooked food. So that made that first year transition a little easier.

But my first year, it took about a year for me to get used to not being home, not seeing my mom and sister every day. But again, it was beneficial. Because I got to meet a lot of different people that I still keep in touch with today. And I was also able to fly home when we weren't in season. So, the transition was, as I mentioned it was rough the first year, but after that it was fine.

Laura Sicari

And what were what was the rest of your time at University of Maryland? Like what did you study?

Bruce James

I studied criminal justice. So, I received my bachelor's degree in criminal justice and thought about going into sociology as well. But I received my bachelor's in criminal justice in 1999. So, I'm

Laura Sicari

Sorry to interrupt. Are there professors that you remember or colleagues?

Bruce James

Yeah. Well, Gil Fisher Stewart was someone who has had a lot of classes with for my criminal justice courses. She's no longer working at the University of Maryland. But she was really influential in helping me decide what I wanted to do. I remember coming up for a visit prior to committing to enroll at the University of Maryland, she always stressed that, that University of Maryland College Park was in a top five for criminal justice degrees in the country at the time. So that was something that was really interesting to me. So that was the main reason that I chose the University of Maryland for college.

Laura Sicari

And what was your experience looking for employment after college? Did you find something right away? Or did you?

Bruce James

So, yeah, sorry to cut you off. So, my transition from you know, once I got my degree my senior year, again, I played sports. So, we had a lot of built in, I'd say built in streams to find what our next would be. So, I was able to go and meet with guys or meet with employees at the FBI in D.C., I was able to meet with the National Park Police in different federal agencies, because I've always stressed that I wanted to be in federal law enforcement. So, my transition from college to getting into my profession was really seamless. And that had a lot to do again, with my coaching staff and my academic support unit at the University of Maryland, they really did make sure that we were prepared for whatever we had next.

So, what inspired this conviction of longtime conviction to go into federal law enforcement. My dad, the influence on my dad, my dad had a tremendous influence on me. I was always proud to see him get up in the morning, and he would work six to six. So he worked these 12 hour days and he would come home and tell me about the days and really tell me about how if you gave a person a chance to really reinvent themselves into give them resources that they could really turn themselves around after committing, you know, crime so he would always come and tell me; share success stories with me about the youth that he worked with.

And, you know, it was really cool to see how proud he was that he was able to play a role in helping someone turn their lives around, you know, because a lot of times, people just want to know that someone cares for him. And that really left an impression on me not seeing my dad play a role in helping to change the lives of young men and women, and Louisiana.

Laura Sicari

And has your experience sort of carried forward that vision? Is there anything about it that's different from what you expected, when you were going into career?

Bruce James

I'd say a lot of things are really the same. So, I can speak for myself in my 22 years of being a federal law enforcement officer, the work has changed, but the people haven't, right. And in that, I mean, a lot of times, I'll get clients that come in, and they're really standoffish, or they may be afraid, because they don't know what to expect once they're coming from extreme periods of incarceration. So of course, at that initial visit, sometimes they are really closed off. And they don't want to let me in, they don't want to build rapport. But over time, we start to break away from those layers.

And I start to really let them know that I'm here not to play a role in getting them sent back to incarceration, but to help them live a fruitful lives. So, once they see that, you know, I am someone that's in that corner and willing to assist them in any ways that that they need, it really does make a difference in how they approach trying to finish their periods of supervision with the US Probation Office. Oh, that's really rewarding. Yeah, because a lot of times also, like, once my clients finished with their periods of supervision, they will call me sometimes I get Christmas cards, Thanksgiving cards.

So, it's really neat to see that they come back. And even after they're finished with supervision, they'll come back and tell me that they got a new job, but I'll get a text message saying that they got married. And it's really cool to see that they're moved on with their lives. And they're just being fruitful and enjoying life.

Laura Sicari

So, your current role is as a warden for the US probation officer?

Bruce James

Oh, no, I'm a federal parole and probation officer with the US Courts. So, I'm supervising. Yeah, I'm supervising clients that are in post-conviction, meaning they've served their periods of incarceration, and then I'm coming in monitoring their parole and probation, and periods of supervised release. So, what I'm doing is really looking at the conditions that were set forth by the court. And I'm here to ensure that they complete those conditions and comply with all conditions of supervision.

Laura Sicari

And is that the kind of work you've done throughout your career, or you mentioned that the work has changed? What did you mean by that, we'll start with that,

Bruce James

Well, when I say the work has changed, meaning, we don't have to do as much face to face with the clients. So, I remember starting in 2002, I will say in most of my clients, and at the time, I may have supervised 60 to 70 individuals. And we will see we had to we were required to see them twice a week. One would be one visit would be in office, the next visit would be outside of the office. So that was a tremendous amount of work, to have to supervise and be responsible for 60 to 70 individuals.

When I say that work has changed, it's more of giving the clients more independence in terms of setting them up for success. You know, we give them the resources that they need, but we're kind of monitoring from afar, in a sense, to ensure that they are complying with the conditions of supervision. So, when I say the work has changed, I mean, you know, we still maintain contact with the client base. But it's not as frequent in terms of how often we see someone that we supervise.

Laura Sicari

It's interesting, because the way that you talk about it sounds more like a support role than an enforcement role.

Bruce James

Yeah, I mean, and I think that's something for me. I want to be supportive. But there are also times where, you know, I may have to be more punitive. But I found that, in my experience, showing more support goes a long way, and helping an individual kind of change their attitudes and change their belief sets to allow them to finish successfully. So, I'd rather be more supportive. But unfortunately, there are times where, you know, we have to go back before the courts, the federal courts, because the clients haven't done things that were issued by the court. So, I hate that part of the job, but unfortunately, it is a part of what we do. But I'm happy to say that my success rate for the clients that I supervise is about over 88%. I rarely have to go to court and have someone step back because they haven't satisfactorily completed all conditions of supervision. And that's something that I take pride in.

Laura Sicari

That's wonderful. Where at what point in your career, were you when you decided to go back and get a master's?

Bruce James

So, I guess I'd say I was 18 years in as a federal supervision officer, right. And I'll tell you guys why I decided to go back to school. So, I have two kids, my wife and I married, and have been married since 2002. My wife and I have two beautiful kids, excuse me. And it was around the time my son was going to college. It was right after he graduated from college in Baltimore. He, you know, we were challenging him. And we will say, hey, go to a challenge, go to a school that's challenging.

And it's going to really help you find out who you are. So, he said, well, that you're pretty comfortable in your job. He was like, you go to work from 7 to 3 [7:00AM to 3:00PM], you come home, he said, If I challenged myself, you should challenge yourself. So, I said, you know what I will. So, I started looking at colleges. I thought about going to the University of Maryland for my masters [master's degree]. But then I found Baltimore [Baltimore City, Maryland], I was like, you know what, I met a lot of lawyers, a lot of attorneys.

And some of my coworkers have graduated from the University of Baltimore. So, I was at that point where I said, you know what, I'm going to go back and get a graduate degree. And no one believed me. My wife was like, oh, you're joking. You know, my kids were like that there's not going back. So there was one afternoon in the summer, I called up Dr. Heather Pfeiffer.

And it's pretty funny. So, she invited me to come in, and I told her what I did. I told her my profession, told her how many years ahead and you know, vested into federal law enforcement. So, at that initial meeting with Dr. Pfeiffer, she said, why aren't you coming back? And I told her, I said, well, my kids challenged me to do something different. I said, and what better way to lead by example, than to apply for a degree, you know, to apply for a master's program with the University of Baltimore. So that they have the fiber was really influential. And, you know, being the last person that said that you know what, you should lead by example, you shouldn't do this.

So, I applied, and got accepted into the University of Baltimore. And when I went home, I never forget the day, my dad, my son was like, well, I guess we'll be sitting doing homework side by side, you know, so it was pretty cool to have that experience. But not only did I do it, to challenge myself and make a promise to my son that I would kind of do something challenging. I wanted to further my career as a law enforcement official, law enforcement officer. And I thought one way that I could do that was by gaining more education. And that's, that was really the blessing and being admitted into the University of Baltimore.

Laura Sicari

So, it sounds like you were looking at the same degree at University of Maryland, as you consider it at University of Baltimore. Is that true?

Bruce James

Yes, it is. Because so, in terms of federal service, I have 22 years of experience, I get to retire. Well, I will retire in 23 months, the clap, The countdown has already started. Cool thing is I just did my retirement counseling session, where, you know, it's really come true where, okay, I looked at my figures, and I really am set to retire in two years. So, I'm extremely excited about that.

So, I had to put that in there. But also, I guess, for me, I wanted to do so I wanted to know what my next would be Once I retired from this job. So, I felt like going get more education in criminal justice would be something that would allow me to open up more avenues in terms of my next. So that was also one of the main reasons why I wanted to go back to school to further my education. And I kind of meet new people for the education and give myself and more opportunities for what's next.

Laura Sicari

And so, how long did the amount? How long were you at the University of Baltimore?

Bruce James

Two years. And it's funny, because I started during the summer, the fall of 2018. But as we all know, COVID came in March 9, 2019. So, my experience at the University of Baltimore, I'd say that first year was, was awesome. I love the in class, in person sessions in person classes. Got to meet a lot of great people, a lot of tremendous professors. As I mentioned, Dr. Heather Pfeiffer, and Dr. William Wright [Dr. Benjamin Wright].

They were influential, and really pushing me to kind of expand my knowledge in the criminal justice field. So, you know, for them, I'll forever be grateful for that for those experiences. And I say that to Dr. Benjamin Wright. I wanted to clarify that.

Laura Sicari

Thank you. Yeah. Um, it sounds like you were in school at the same time as your son who was living at home. Is that true?

Bruce James

So, he actually went to Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. So he was out of the home, but again, at one point, he even had to come back because of COVID. So, I remember there were days where we were sitting in the same room doing homework, and he asked me about what I was working on. What are you studying? And I tell him, and I said, well, what are you studying? He was like, well, you should have a frame knowledge for what I'm doing.

You need to help me out. And I'm like, absolutely not. You need to do that on your own. So, it was pretty cool to sit side by side with my son. And really, you know, finish our college courses. Now, at the same time, of course, my wife and we have a daughter who's 18, she would come in as well and look around and say, well, what are you guys doing? I can do the work you do.

And so, it was always fun, it was a family event. And you know, my wife, and my daughter would always tease my son and I, in terms of how long we it took us to finish assignments. But we'd like to think that we were just thorough, really thorough in completing tasks.

Laura Sicari

So, it sounds like you liked being a student.

Bruce James

Oh! I loved it, I loved it. Again, it was great. Like, like, for 18 years, I was just an employee, but allowed me to go back to school, and really learn new things and hear different points of view from different people from that, like a wide age range was really cool.

It was really cool to share my thoughts, sharing my personal work experience and life experiences, but also hear their experience and see how people again, from different parts of the country could come in, come together, and not only learn the same material, but also approach how we learn from a lot of different ways. So that was really enjoyable and really cool experience.

Laura Sicari

So, it sounds like the University of Baltimore, and the criminal justice program had a good reputation among your colleagues when you selected it. Is that true?

Bruce James

Yeah. So, I'm walking around with a well, prior to going to the University of Baltimore, I will walk around my office was filled with Maryland Terrapins stuff, right, I had that turret pride. But as I mentioned, you know, I will be in the federal courthouse, and I'd be walking around different offices, talking to attorneys, talking to different federal judges. And I started seeing more and more. University of Baltimore, paraphernalia, jackets, shirts, bees everywhere.

So, the University of Baltimore really is influential in, and I guess shaping, you know, the lives of my coworkers, a lot of my coworkers went to University of Baltimore. And one thing that I can't say is that they've always spoke highly about the university, and what it did for them and the opportunities that it allowed them to pursue, once they upon their graduation. So that was something that really made me say, hey, you know what, I really don't have to go to college park, everything I need is right in

downtown Baltimore. And that was another reason why I made the decision to attend the University of Baltimore, and it was a really good decision for me.

Laura Sicari

So, it sounds like you spent a fair amount of time at least in the first year of your program on campus.

Bruce James Yep. So, my typical days, and I could just the easiest way for me to frame it is I worked from seven to three, right. And on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I would attend the University classes at Baltimore [University of Baltimore]. And so, when I got off at three, I go to the library, sit down and do some extra reading or get my course materials together. And then I'd have class from like five to 8:30. And those classes were always really engaging, and did not feel like two and a half, three hours.

And it just was really cool to sit in person. And really share the knowledge that I had with my peers, my cohort and the professors. And it was really cool to be in person to have professors put you on the spot and talk about why you learn and how you learned in life and how to apply different messages and procedures.

So, it was really cool to be on campus. Not only were the staff members and the professors extremely helpful, but my cohort, my classmates were really helpful and always willing to get together and really share ideas so that we spent a lot of days and a lot of evenings and weekends in the library and just going over different topics, different materials, but also really kind of looking at how we might have gotten to the same, the same end game or the same in by different means. So, it was really cool to share those experiences in person prior to COVID.

Laura Sicari

So, it sounds like you were part of a cohort, did it stay the same throughout the program? Did you have the same classmates throughout the program?

Bruce James

Yes, we did. Yeah. So, I really got to know I had the same cohort for two years. That doing that really allowed us to come together really allowed us to kind of know each other's work to know each other's strengths and weaknesses. And, you know, the cool thing about that is, if we knew someone wasn't a strong, I won't say weak, there wasn't a strong in a certain area, my cohort, we together, we would allow that person to develop those skills by giving them tasks that they may not have been strong in to help them develop those skills. And that was something that our professors always encouraged us to do.

So, it was cool to see people strengthen their knowledge base by allowing them to again, just work on areas where they may not have been as strong. But I had the same cohort for two years. Still talk to them to this day. And that was just a really enjoyable experience to come in with the same group that I graduated with.

Laura Sicari

And did your classmates have similar work backgrounds and experiences you as you or was there a lot of variation?

Bruce James

There was a lot of variation. I was in my 40s, everyone else when they were in their 20s. So, there was like that 20-year age gap where to the kind of respect to me a little too much, they will call me Mr. James. And I'm like, please just call me Bruce, you know. So, there was a 20-age range. But again, it was cool for them to hear my experiences. But it was also good for me to hear how they approach criminal justice work from their lens.

Laura Sicari

Sorry to interrupt you. How was it different? Or what did you learn from your younger classmates?

Bruce James

Well, I learned that they're more social work based than I was in my 20s. And my 20s, when I started this profession, I was like, like, really bought a book, like, okay, if you miss one office visit, we need to go back to court, you know, we need to go back before the judge.

And now what I'm seeing with what the younger generation is feeling like, you know, what, you need to do a little more talking, build that rapport even more at the, at the beginning of supervision, right. So they were more at the time, I guess, lenient in terms of how they would supervise and, and I was something that that I use to this day, I don't try to be as heavy handed in in issuing sanctions.

But I really tried to have a social work-based approach, and a more empathetic approach. That's the one thing that I've seen in the younger generation, they're more apt to show more empathy, they're more empathetic. And I think that that helps them effectively build rapport with, with their client base.

Laura Sicari

Was that also an influence or focus of the program itself?

Bruce James

It was, yeah, we use a lot of evidence-based practices to show that, you know, being punitive isn't always the best way to deal with the criminal justice population. And this was actually seen. So, in my second year of my master's program, I had the tremendous opportunity to go to Germany with about eight other classmates, we went to Berlin, Germany for 10 days. And we got to study the prison system in Berlin and compare that to the prison systems in the US. And I believe at the time the recidivism rate, I guess, in 2019, was like, between two and 6%. Right.

And that was like really shocking for me to see and for us to hear. Because at the time, I had been into the federal system for almost 20 years, but going to Berlin really was eye opening to see how that criminal justice system really does try to rehabilitate those who are under the criminal justice system. In Berlin, the jails we went to in the prisons, they were open.

They weren't locks on the doors. And these were maximum security prisons, each. Each inmate had a phone in their room where they could call their family, they got to leave and go to work every day in downtown Berlin. And that was extremely different from how we, you know, how we house inmates and, in the US, so it was really eye opening to see the differences in the European? Well, I'd say the Berlin criminal justice system, as opposed to the US.

Laura Sicari

When you say eye opening was your initial reaction, what was your initial reaction was it?

Bruce James

I will never forget, we went into a maximum-security prison, and no one was locked up behind bars. We searched, we walked in, everyone was just out on a courtyard. And at the time, they were actually they were cleaning up the yard.

So they were like axes, like pickaxes, they were like garden tools in area. So, we were looking at each other, like, he just have a lot of dangerous weapons laying around. And that's how we quickly found out that know that the inmates were trusted, like, they weren't seen as they were almost seen as just landscapers at the time.

So, after seeing everyone in the courtyard, just doing that work, we saw a lot of inmates changing their clothes, and leaving the facility. And that's what that was our introduction to Berlin's criminal justice system in the maximum-security prisons that we went to. That's when we were told that, hey, we allow our prisoners to go out and be reformed, we let them go get jobs, they are able to see their families, there was even a huge win in that maximum security prison. It was a daycare, the walls were painted yellow, they will have really cool designs on the walls. And it will those were actually painted by the inmates. So that was really eye opening to see. And we actually got to see a few visits, what, when minors will come and see them on us.

So, we got to see how they engaged in how staff members really let them touch and really let them you know, be with their kids. And that was really powerful to see that. And that's something that I'll always take with me. In contrast, you know, comparing and contrasting the US prison system as opposed to Germany's prison system.

Laura Sicari

Yeah. What was it like witnessing that and then coming back to work?

Bruce James

Well, it made it seem really kind of honestly draconian and how we continue to supervise housing individuals and our federal prison system. You know, I've also been to prison systems in Pennsylvania and several other states to kind of see how everyone's you know how to treat it. And it's the contract could not be greater.

You know, in the US, we have 23-hour lock downs, and in some instances, 24-hour lock downs. And that was just completely different from what I saw in Berlin. And it really makes me wonder how, you know, how can we really rehabilitate someone when we treated them, and housing them for hours, instead of giving them more opportunities and more resources to rehabilitate themselves. So, you know, that's something that I still work with.

And that's one of the reasons why when I'm doing my introduction to my client base, and I don't call them offenders, I don't call them defendants. I call them my clients, because I want them to know I don't see him as a criminal. I see him as someone who made a mistake, I give them every opportunity to know that, hey, Mr. James really will work with me. And he's going to try to be influential in helping them be successful. But I really just try to have a more of a social work attitude at this point in my career, because I want to see them do well and live healthy lives, and meaningful lives.

Laura Sicari

And so that that exchange program in Berlin was part of your studies with UBalt.

Bruce James

Yes, it was.

Laura Sicari

That's really amazing.

Bruce James

It wasn't, it wasn't a tremendous experience, it really was, we got to see culture. You know, during those 10 days, we wake up at 7am. And we catch a train that's called Alexander Platz, we catch the train. And really, we are traveling to tour. But a lot of what we did was going to those prisons and meeting with different law enforcement officials in Berlin. And again, everything from top to bottom was about rehabilitation.

And that's something that will always stick with me. And again, their recidivism rate was between two and 6%. So, I think the numbers speak for themselves. And there are, you know, the metrics show that that their system has been effective in reducing recidivism, but also having they're their population base, find success once they're released from custody.

Laura Sicari

It sounds like this program has had a really huge impact on your career and your outlook on what it is that you do.

Bruce James

It has I mean; I'd say that it's only strengthened. I guess my approach, because as I mentioned, in the past couple years, I'd already started kind of reframing how I did the work. So, I wanted to be more social work based and really help. But after coming from Germany, and really seeing that experience, and really sitting with myself, and kind of writing reports and writing down the contrast and differences, it really made me see like, like that, my passion. And my work was not to just control like my clients. I hate using that, but really to help them be successful once they complete their periods of supervision and incarceration. And that's what I've adopted. And that's how I continue to practice the work that I do.

Laura Sicari

I know that you mentioned retirement, but you sound really committed and enthusiastic. What do you envision after your official retirement?

Bruce James

Well, I probably will do something in athletics. So right now, I co-chair an advisory commission with the big 10 Athletic Conference. And I've been doing that for eight years. So, they've already told me like, hey, once you get once you finish school, and once you retire, they always tell me, hey, I'm willing to move to Chicago, there is a job waiting for me.

So, I may do something in athletics and compliance. If not, my wife's a psychologist, she has a practice, and we have two locations. So, I may just go work with my wife. Either way, it's going to be great. It's going to be tremendous. But I have some options. So, I'm just looking at how I can better again, I just want to help people in a different way. I've done this for 22 years.

And if I choose to, I guess go into different avenues, it still will be trying to help whether that's collegiate athletes, or helping people in the community that you know, under my wife's business. So those are some of the options that I had, including fishing. I'm an avid fisherman, so I'm going to build some time to fish as well. That sounds great.

Laura Sicari

So, it sounds like it's been about four years, maybe since you finished your degree at UB, is that correct?

Bruce James

Yep, that's correct.

Laura Sicari

Are you still involved as an alumnus with UBalt?

Bruce James

Well, right now I'm extremely busy. So, it makes it hard for me to get back. So, I haven't done as many alumni events as I'd like to. But I plan on actively like, like being more active in the near future. I have a daughter who plays college lacrosse. So, we are always busy. We are always on the road, I'm always gone. If I'm not with my daughter or my family, I'm flying to Chicago for big 10 events. But I plan to be more involved because I owe a lot to the University of Baltimore because, as I mentioned, you know, before like the university really was a great experience for me. And I want to give back not only to the university but to younger students who have passed doing a master's and bachelor's at the University of Baltimore.

Laura Sicari

Well, it sounds like you also mentioned maintaining relationships with your classmates who are younger and maybe at the start of their careers. Is that right?

Bruce James

Yes, it is. So I happen to have really close friends, once working with Customs and Border Patrol, and others, and FBI, and they always tell me that their jobs are top secret. I'm like, come on, really. But I keep in touch with a lot of my classmates, everyone's doing well, I'm able to follow them through social media. And we all if we don't speak by phone, we always send each other messages saying, hey, keep up the good work, you know. And, again, I'm on the back into my first career.

So, I'm always telling them, if you guys need any help, if you have any questions, feel free to reach back to me. And sometimes they do. They have questions about what their career path should be, or if I think certain things are good, you know, certain career moves. So, I offer my advice, but also support them through the things that they're going through in terms of their profession, or if they, you know, want to pursue additional degrees. But we all keep in touch. We all plan on kind of meet once or twice a year just to catch up when everyone's in town. So that's something that we have been able to do. And hopefully we will continue.

Laura Sicari

That's great. I actually want to go back to your time as a student, because I wanted to ask specifically about the pandemic, which was a historic event that changed how we do everything and school and you mentioned the change, but what was it like? What was it like being a student during the pandemic.

Bruce James

It was really lonely. Like, as I mentioned, the first year, we were in class, in person for classes, I got to meet with my cohort a lot. Like we really have, as I mentioned, we met on the weekends, we met in the evenings, before class, but when the pandemic hit, all the work was independent. So other than us being on the phone or on a zoom, you know, we didn't get a chance to see each other as much. And that was kind of stressful, not only for us, but for the professors as well.

Because we really enjoyed the in-person dialogue between the professors in the cohort, the students, but the pandemic was pretty lonely. I didn't like working as much alone as I did when my cohort still got the work done. But I always enjoy sitting there and being able to in real time and in person, you know, bounce ideas off of my cohort and bounce ideas off of the professor's it just wasn't the same for me like doing it over zoom, or just being on a conference call. But you know, again, I don't feel like learning suffered. But I really did miss the in-person aspect of being in my graduate program at the University of Baltimore.

Laura Sicari

Did it sound like your fellow classmates have this similar experience? Or maybe their age changes their experience a little bit?

Bruce James

No, absolutely. They're a lot more social than I am, like. So, one thing they love to do, we used to meet at brass tacks, and they would be like at 8:30. And I'm like, I really go to bed at 9:30. But we would meet at 8:30, Right? So that was like the running joke. They're like, we got to meet early because Bruce's go on leave. I brought this up after one hour, right. But they also missed the in-person sessions, we had an in-person study and just the camaraderie, being able to laugh and talk about the program and share insight while eating the best buffalo wings around.

So, the pandemic took a toll on everyone in the cohort, we all missed being in person. But again, the quality of the program didn't suffer. Our professors didn't miss a beat. They were attentive, they were even more willing to meet with us outside of the regular scheduled office hours, just to ensure that that as a result of the pandemic, that nothing was suffering in terms of the coursework or any issues or concerns that we may have had with anything in the program.

Laura Sicari

Did you have an opportunity to graduate and walk in person or celebrate in some way?

Bruce James

We did. But it was delayed. I believe we walked at the end of 2022. So, we have to wait like a year to walk. But I give the university tons of credit because they made sure that we would get the opportunity to not only walk across the stage but have our family members and loved ones see us walk across the

stage. And even in that, you know, the graduation ceremony was close to family. So, they again had to watch through zoom. But we did get the experience of walking across and getting our diploma. So that was really special. To me. That was something that I've always wanted to do. And it was really cool that my family got the opportunity not just in Baltimore but also my family at home and Louisiana. They got to see me walk across the stage and I know for my mom, that was one of the most, I guess, proudest moments that she's had for me.

My dad unfortunately passed away, so he wasn't able to see that, but it was something that was special to me and my family. So, I really appreciate the University in Baltimore making that a priority, allowing us to; everyone who graduated during the pandemic to come back at some point, and have that experience of walking across the stage to get their degrees.

Laura Sicari

How old is your mom?

Bruce James I'm

sorry?

Laura Sicari

How old is your mom?

Bruce James

Oh, she's 72. 72 years young. Yes.

Laura Sicari

She probably knew how to zoom.

Bruce James

Oh, yes. She had to get some help. But she was on a call she got it. She got it. I made sure I called my sister all week, I was like, make sure Mom has the Zoom set up properly, please. So, she doesn't miss it. But she was on it. As soon as I walked across the stage, my phone started going off. She's like, I saw you walk across the stage. And she was so excited. She was so excited. So, it was really cool. It was really cool experience.

Laura Sicari

And after your program after you finished your MS in criminal justice, did your role at work change? Or did you retain the same title and role and just kind of change how you looked at what you did?

Bruce James

No, I've retained the same title and role. But it's kind of again changed the way I did the work to kind of strengthened my want and my desire to be more social work based and more evidence practice based in terms of how I supervise my caseload. I try to treat my clients with care, concern and empathy. And while also looking at evidence-based practices in terms of what works in supervising, you know, Adult Offender, offenders, defendants and clients. So, my role has stayed the same. But my outlook and my approach to the work has been strengthened by the classes that I've taken in my degree from the University of Baltimore.

Laura Sicari

Is there anything else that is important that you'd like to share about? About your time at the University of Baltimore?

Bruce James

Yeah! So, the one thing that I will say is, I had a lot of reservations about going back to college after not being there for 18 to 19 years. But every part of my experience at the University of Baltimore, was treated with love, care and compassion by the professors. From that initial visit with Dr. Heather Pfeiffer, to the great talks I had with Dr. Benjamin Wright, who was really influential in helping me to push myself to be better.

So, the one thing that I would encourage anyone to do, if you're considering getting a bachelor's degree graduate degree, from the University of Baltimore, take the leap and really apply yourself because you will be supported, you will be pushed to do best your best. But you're also going to meet some great people that may really ended up being lifelong friends, lifelong coworkers. And that's the one thing that I will take home is I'm glad I had the courage and support from my wife and my kids to make the decision to go back and get a graduate degree.

But also, I would encourage anyone just to follow your dreams. I mean, you won't be disappointed. Every time I passed the University of Baltimore every day, and I'm smiling when I pass the university because I'm always thinking of something that happened, or, you know, someone I met, like my professors, I saw Dr. Benjamin Wright about a year and a half ago. And, you know, he saw he was I was one of my wife, actually, we will go into the bookstore. And he was just so complimentary of me, and, you know, kind of talked to my wife about how much I participated in class. And I really appreciated that he made me look so good that day. But I'd say the professors are top notch students are top notch. So, I would tell anyone who's thinking about going to take the leap, and you will not be disappointed. So great university.

Laura Sicari

Were there any other departments or support services or any other people, you know, that that you that, that supported you from UBalt, while you were there, besides your, you know, prep professors directly?

Bruce James

Yeah, actually, I met someone from the I guess it's the Learning Center, The Learning and Disability Center. And they were asking me, they were like, well, you haven't been here 20 years, like, if you have any learning disabilities that are documented, go back into your records from 20 years ago and find it and we will be offered, you know, they'll offer any assistance. So again, everyone in every department was really willing to show support, and they were supportive. They were always professional, always Kind and Courteous. So that's all you can ask for in the universities to know that. They're not just a number out of university, but a name that the staff members and my professors knew us by name, and they really knew who we were as people. And that, in turn, is what allowed them to push us when they knew we needed to be pushed. But also, they just encouraged us to be the best people that we could be. And I'll be forever thankful for that.

Laura Sicari

That's great. Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing your experience and your time today. I know that you have to be in court and so yes, if there's any other last words, if there's not any other last words, I guess I will just say you know, thank you and yeah good luck in your next chapter.

Bruce James

Thank you and I just want to tell you guys again thanks for having me. I really appreciated this opportunity and a special thank you to Dr Benjamin Wright. I promise we will go to lunch soon, and I thank you for this wonderful opportunity and you guys be blessed and have a great day you.