



# PROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN COACHING TODAY

Chris McCluskey & Kim Avery

*The podcast dedicated to Raising the Standard of Coaching...  
and Changing the World*

## Episode 003

### From Tragedy to Triumph: John Ramstead, Part 1

Chris: Hello and welcome to Professional Christian Coaching Today. I'm Chris McCluskey.

Kim: And I'm Kim Avery.

Chris: Join us in raising the standard of coaching in changing the world.

Well, we have a major treat today on this episode. A dear friend, actually, who originally came to me only a year and a half ago as a student at the Institute, Professional Christian Coaching Institute, John Ramstead, is going to be joining Kim and I here today to talk about the process that led up to his transition into the field of coaching and what that transition has been like for him. How he launched his private practice and such, so if any of our listeners are in a place right now of kind of seeking to discern whether or not God might be calling them, you'll definitely want to pay attention to this episode because this may be fuel for your fire. Likewise, anybody else who is listening who's not particularly looking at coaching as a profession but senses that God is taking them to that new next, whatever is going to be their new normal. The scripture verse that comes to mind is the Lord saying, "Behold, I will do a new thing. Will you not perceive it?" If you are listening and you are sensing the

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need to perceive "God, what are you doing here? What are you calling me to? What's next?" Then, again, I think you're going to have a lot of fuel for your fire today.

Kim: And I'm really excited as well, Chris. John and I had the opportunity to meet shortly before he began coach training school and I'm gonna admit, John, and maybe you can lead off with this, when you told your story, what you were hoping God would do, I was a little cautious. But I said okay, let's wait and see. Let's not jump the gun and, of course, as always, God proved Himself more than faithful to work through your life, so I'm excited about people hearing your story today.

John: Well, thank you both and thank you for having me on. And I just wanted to say right now, you know, both of you, Chris and Kim, you've had such a huge impact on my life, what God's called me to do. It's been not just a blessing to myself but to my wife, my kids, my family, and just the amazing clients I get to work with. And just the place I find myself in today, which is just a level of joy and fulfillment and energy I honestly never thought I could get to prior to this whole journey over the last three years, which I'm sure we'll get into.

Chris: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah! John, I'm smiling. I can't stop myself from smiling. This is such a fun story so let's dive into it here. Give us a bit of brief background, first of all, on your life before the huge pivotal incident that kind of set the trajectory of this next season.

John: Well, I grew up in Minnesota. I'll never forget...my brother was quite a wild child so my folks thought to head that off we're going to send John to Saint Thomas Academy. It was an all boys' Catholic military high school. And you know I did not want to go there. This--

Chris: Oh, baby!

John: So we made an agreement. My dad said, "If you don't like it after the first year, you can go to the public school." That's where my brother got in trouble. Well, after the first year I said, "Hey, Dad, I did not like it there." And he goes, "Hey, John, I was

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kidding. You're going back." [Laughter] Um, I ended up graduating there and I'd always just, everybody in my family had served in the military all the way back as far as World War II, World War I, Vietnam, so I knew I wanted to go into the military so I ended up getting into the Naval Academy and I also got an ROTC scholarship and I decided to go that path.

I went to Rensselaer Polytech and got a degree in electrical engineering, was able to get into flight school and went down to Pensacola, Florida. I became a navy aviator and was just humbled and honored to fly F-14s. I flew fighters off aircraft carriers for about eight years. I was in Desert Storm and I got orders to go back to San Diego to go through Top Gun as a student, which was a dream of mine. In the interim I was playing soft ball and got hit with a soft ball, a line drive in the right eye and blew out the back of my eye socket. Had some nerve damage to my eye and I was done. My dream was just ripped away from me and I was just the walking wounded for the next two years. I think, from your psychology, counseling background, Chris, I was just very deeply, functionally depressed because I honestly had no direction in my life.

But it was through that that I just met some incredible mentors who were in business. This first started showing me the power of people in the market place and what they can have in people's lives. It was that group that led me to the Lord! They shared their own testimonies as they were mentoring me into this new business career and so that was just an incredible experience for me. It changed everything in my life. I became a believer and my wife, who was at that church service where it happened, wanted nothing to do with it. So, for the next year, here I am and here's Donna hanging out with all our old friends, doing all the stuff we used to do on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday nights and I just didn't have an interest in that. They gave me some incredible counsel during that period of time. They said, "You know, God waited for you for twenty-seven years with unconditional love. Don't you think you need to do that for Donna?" And I was like, "Whoa." I was convicted.

Um, and you know what, just giving her the space to just do this on her own, a year later at that same church she went forward. And it's amazing. We've been married

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twenty-five years and she's just my absolute best friend in the world, my soul mate in the truest sense of the word.

But now, in that early part of my career, I found that I was just really good with people and relationships and got into a career in sales. And through that a friend of mine back in Minnesota called me and said, "Hey, I'm starting a company and I'd love for you to come back and start this company with me." So I moved back to Minnesota, the whole family, and started that company and grew that. And was asked to be part of a software startup doing data mining business intelligence software and we grew that to a million dollars a month in sales. And then the Internet bubble took us out at the knees. But through that I had made some friends at a very large Fortune 50 technology company and they were going to do a startup inside of this company. They wanted this new business unit to go from zero to 400 million in revenue to contribute to this company and I was part of the team that did that. We executed on that, I developed my entire region of the country, developed my staff, the training, sales. You know, every aspect to that.

But in all three of these startups, working eighty, ninety hours a week, traveling constantly, I realized I had become my dad. He was a litigator. He worked six days a week. And I thought, "You know, I've created a lifestyle I don't get to participate in." And I was looking for something different so I actually took a pretty significant pay cut from that world and went to an initial pay cut to work for a Wall Street firm to develop a financial consulting practice based out of Minneapolis. I wouldn't be traveling anymore and I was a public company. I worked with them and they moved me to Denver, Chris. They called me in 2008 - this is right before the financial storm hit - and said, "Hey, it's your choice." The CEO called me and said, "Do you want to move to Denver?" And I look at Donna. [laughter]

But we were conflicted though, right? This is my home. This is what we're praying. I have to tell you this story. So we had just had this prayer session. We're down on our knees, up in our bedroom and it's late at night. I have to get up early. About just discernment, "God, just give us a sign." So Donna goes, "I just can't sleep. I've going

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to go fold laundry or something." She comes up like two minutes later and she throws open the door, like Kramer on Seinfeld. She's like, "John! You've gotta come downstairs." So what's a guy's response, lying in bed? "Honey, can't you just tell me? Just tell me." She's like, "No, you've gotta come downstairs right now."

So I come downstairs and frozen on the tv - she'd paused it - was John Denver. And I'm like, "Oh, come on." [laughter] This was a movie that John Denver was in and she's like, "Sit down, shut up, and just watch." So she hits play and John Denver's in this boardroom and the CEO guy comes in and he goes, "I've been thinking about this and going through this I've figured out the answer." And he pulls out this blackboard - this is an older movie - and there's a map of the U.S. and there is an arrow from Minneapolis to Denver. He goes, "We need to go west."

Chris: Wow!

John: I get chills just telling you about it. I'm like, "Oh, my gosh!" How clear is that? So, honestly, we decided to move to Denver and everything in our life upheveled, our relationships, our kids' coaches, our schools. We decided to homeschool, actually. So I was here and just starting to get a little discontent with this company, being in this big culture and I decided, you know, I want to get back to my entrepreneurial roots. Me and a friend of mine decided, you know, we're going to do this. We're going to buy this operating unit of this, uh, it was owned by a public bank and we were going to bring it private. We're going to be a part of this, run it, grow it. And I'd been there five months, Chris, when I had that life defining accident that should have been fatal.

Kim: Wow, John, that is an amazing story and even before you go into that life changing event I just have a quick follow up question, which is this: It's interesting how you reached everybody's, maybe even your own, definition of success, it sounds like three or four different times in your life. And you got to that very definition of success and there was something within you, some value that wasn't being honored that made you step back and say, "This isn't quite it." Can you talk a little bit about that?

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John: Kim, this is such a great question. You know, why did I go through all these job, career changes? I could tell you from the outside, I started two non-profits, one in the political world and was on a number of the marquis boards of directors here in Colorado, business wise. The home we had was just this beautiful home, driving Range Rovers, taking vacations. So from the outside everybody thought, you know, Ramstead, he's doing great. And I was miserable.

I couldn't even tell you why. What I would call it at this point, looking back, would be smoldering discontent. And I think what happened is...I had had this relationship with God that was just on fire early on, when I was twenty-seven and as I went through my corporate career, Kim, and I had these successes in business and closed these huge deals and each year the paycheck was bigger and bigger. And I started giving myself credit. I started to do the planning and say, "here's my plan for next year," and I would get done with it and kind of lift it up in prayer and say, "God, here's my plan, please bless it." And if it went well, it would be like, "hey, thanks, big guy." And if it didn't go well, it would be like, "Seriously? Come on, I'm good guy." But I was not.

I think before the accident I had probably shared my faith, my testimony, with maybe five or six people my whole life. It became very clear to me, really, looking back on it retrospectively, that I had not connected with the person that God had created in me early on. You know, before the world was even formed and what He wanted me to be doing. I was already in this camp but I was not being effective. And I think it was that disconnect for me that had really led to that discontent. Donna, my wife, just said, "You know, sometimes you just aren't happier, just grumpy with all this going on. You're just not pleasant to be around a lot of the time." And that's where I was, kind of, going into this. I was really seeking fulfillment, going into this new entrepreneurial venture just to fill that hole, but I'd never slowed down enough to say, "What is this hole? Where are these longings coming from? What would contentment, fulfillment, even look like?" I didn't even know how to ask those questions, quite frankly.

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Chris: Wow, so yeah, that's a tee up, because God kind of decided, "Well, I'm going to show you how to ask those kinds of questions." Huh? "Yep, I'm just going to take you out for awhile and we're gonna go behind the woodshed." So take us into it, John. Take us into the accident. What happened?

John: Well, I was very involved in politics and I was invited down to Texas to help vet Governor Perry. This was the last election cycle and when he was going to come out. And that's when I met Dr. Dobson and some other people who were very close to him. And I got a call after that event that he was going to do a retreat up at one of his donor's ranches in Montana, this big beautiful gentlemen's ranch and would I like to join them? So I did that and so I had a plane that I've always been flying since I got out of the Navy so I flew my own plane up there to Montana, landed. And that was where I met a friend of all of ours, Steve Rider, who's been a part of our podcasts and show that we're doing.

We got in on Thursday and on Friday we were going to ride horses to the back of this property. I was one of the first people saddled and I was sitting on my horse. And the horse walked out into this big open yard and all of the sudden, Chris, he just bolted. And took off to the right, like a ninety degree turn, so fast I thought I was going to flip off the back. I was actually lying on his rump. His rump was hitting me on the shoulder blades and I was squeezing my legs for all I was worth because I was scared to death I was going to slip off and get hit in the head, you know. And at every step he's pulling and accelerating and I'm just trying to get my weight back up from the saddle, which I finally did.

And I'm looking ahead of me and he's aimed straight perpendicular to this steel fence line that's, I don't know, fifty, seventy-five yards in front of me. My right foot had fallen out of the stirrups so I'm just kind of squeezing this horse. And I remember taking the rein...because it was clear off to the left, this fence line ended. And I pulled his head all the way over to the left and he just pulled his head back, almost pulled the rein out of my hands. I'm like, "Uh, okay...You're not supposed to do that." And so I tried it again and he just pulled his head back again. Now, it felt to me like we were in

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a full gallop and I remember thinking, "I've got to bail off this horse. We're getting closer to the fence."

I started panicking. You know, I've flown in combat, landed on aircraft carriers at night. I've flown low levels, a hundred feet at four or five hundred miles per hour and I had never felt this, kind of, almost being out of control before. I remember thinking, "I've gotta jump off this horse but if I do, I'm up so high and I'm going so fast, I'm going to break my neck. I can't do that. This horse can't be suicidal." My thoughts were just going a million miles an hour. And we're getting closer and closer to the fence, as this horse is running and about fifteen yards in front of the fence I realize there's no way out. It's like everything just slowed down and I remember thinking calmly to myself, "This is not going to end well." That's the last thing I remember.

Until I woke up on the ground. Now, to share what happened, to give a little context to what happened next to me is, in the next two and a half years I had over twenty-three surgeries and procedures. What happened is, the horse crashed into the fence. He bucked so hard he flipped over and hit the fence rump first on the ground. When he did that, he launched me so the top bar hit me across the skull. I lost eight teeth, shattered the left side of my skull, broke my neck, almost everything in my shoulder was destroyed, crushed my ribcage, punctured my left lung. I was told afterward that this should not have been a survival accident. Best-case scenario, I should have been a quadriplegic, needing lifelong care. The brain injury, I had a severe traumatic brain injury. There was so much bleeding in my brain when I first got to, I was first at, Kroger Hospital that just works with brain injuries for two years. They told me when I checked out at the end of two years that they would have been really happy with about a thirty to fifty percent cognitive recovery. What happened was, I had one hundred percent recovery.

I'm laying on the ground and I wake up and I'm in more pain - that's the first thing I'm aware of - than anything I could ever describe. There are people holding me down, my head, my hips, my shoulders. There's a woman holding my hand and I can hear everyone talking and someone praying. I hear the woman holding my hand say, "I

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think he's going into shock." I was struggling, trying to get away this pain. They're holding me down, and all of a sudden, I just felt the presence of God just completely surround me. And it was the most intense and personal, unconditional love in my entire life. I dwell on this a lot...everything I've ever done in my life, good, bad, other, was not even relevant. And I remember the first thought that went through my head as soon as I felt God's presence was, "I'm not worthy of someone loving me like this." I remember thinking that very clearly.

And then I just felt this peace and it was washing over me like waves of an ocean. It was rhythmic and all that pain and panic and fear was just - it didn't diminish - it was just gone. You know, like as far as the east is from the west. I mean it was gone. And then God spoke to me and it was a voice that came from everywhere and nowhere. And it wasn't to my ears; there was no source to it. It was like it was flowing through my center, like right through my sternum. And He said, "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord. And I'm going to heal you and use this for my glory." Then He said, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." And as soon as He said that, I knew my left eye was permanently blind. And what had happened is that all the bones behind the eye socket had been shattered and it severed that optic nerve. It is detached. The only way to ever repair it is if God decides to repair it, which He hasn't. Then I woke up and calmly said to everyone around me - I had actually just opened my eyes, "God says it's going to be okay, you don't have to worry." And for the next hour until the Life Flight helicopter got there to take me to the hospital, I don't remember being in any pain. I remember talking to the people around me. Steve was there and he said I kept asking questions. It was like my brain was rebooting. But I was doing well enough that they did not think that this was something life threatening. When they first talked to my wife, Donna, they were like, "Yeah, you need to come up. John got thrown off a horse but you can bring him home." Later when she called, Dr. Dobson answered when I was in the hospital and they had some awareness of what had happened. He was like, "You need to get up here because we don't know if he's going to make it." And that was the start of it. The accident was about three and a half years ago.

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Kim: That just gives me goose bumps everywhere to hear you talk about God piercing that thin veil between heaven and earth to love you like that and to have that experience. Um, yeah, what did that do to your faith and what is it still doing for your faith and your relationship with God?

John: The biggest thing it did, Kim, is something I love working with my clients on or anybody I can work with at church, friends. Coming from the military, I think this is the best metaphor. You know, think of a commanding general, you know he's got your back. You know he's in charge but you know you can't go up to the general and say, "You know, sir, I'm having a bad day. Can I have a hug? Right? [laughter] I never thought that I could have a personal relationship with God, that He would be personally interested in who I am, who John Ramstead is and care about me. And want to have the same kind of relationship with me that I have with my wife. I really think He modeled marriage after the relationship that He wants to have with us. So think about that intimacy, that romance, that friendship, the joy. You're going through trials and struggles together as partners in this world. I think that's what God wants to have with us but even on a deeper level and when I was in His presence and felt that personal love, that friendship, I knew. It instantly for me moved from this kind of authoritarian figure to actually a real person that I can have a real relationship with. And ever since that moment, Kim, it's just been an awesome journey because my faith has just been continuing to grow. There's always hope of a new future no matter what you go through, right? We're always going to have trials, tribulations, and struggles. A lot of them absolutely don't make sense to our human minds about some of the things that are going on in this human world, maybe in our lives. Certainly in some of the things I had to go through after the accident that were difficult, very painful. But I always knew that there was a reason behind it and if I could just choose to have that hope in Christ that maybe just the next five minutes would be better. Sometimes I just had to get through five minutes, you know, after some of the things I was going through. But I knew that three months from now, six months from now, there was a reason and I could not see it in the moment that I was in.

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Chris: What a gift, that word from Him, that presence and experience of His very, very real presence with you in that moment was. I know I'm speaking for the rest of the listeners. There's this need for a big exhale at this point. I mean, that is just a grip you and hold you on the edge of your seat, nail biter kind of a story. And it's real. And as you said, it's only three and a half years ago. We're not talking about somebody who's had that twenty or thirty percent recovery, as you said. This is a hundred percent recovery. There's impairments, as you said, your right eye doesn't function and you can't work those eighty and ninety hour weeks and such, but God took you into that recovery phase of, as you said, a couple of years there. So maybe kind of walk us through just pieces of those two years that you're in recovery. You're, I would imagine, spending hours and hours on your back or in some kind of traction or just laid up and very, very limited in terms of your actual ability to move with a broken neck and all those broken bones and such. But, internally, John Ramstead with John Ramstead, John Ramstead with the Lord, and then, externally, John Ramstead with his wife, Donna, and looking toward vision for whatever is yet to come, whatever the Lord meant by "I'm going to use this for good." Can you help us to enter into the space of some of those years of recovery?

John: One of the hardest things for me, Chris, going through that, was honestly, why me? I did not feel worthy of this gift that I'd been given. When I went to Craig Hospital and there's these hundreds other brain injured people who'd had accidents, had injuries that were not as severe as mine but they were not able to function. They were not able to feed themselves or were in wheelchairs and I'm like, you know, what is it about me that God chose to save me. I was very thankful. I get to be here with my wife and my kids and I had this new relationship, you know, with Christ. And so what I was really concentrating on, it really gets back to Ephesians 2:10, right? You know, we are Christ's workmanship, so first of all, what did He create in me that He wanted to keep here on earth and what do I need to be doing with that? That would honor this incredible gift He gave me? And I realized that that's the perspective, Chris, I should have had before the accident. Because nothing really, honestly changed.

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I'm here. Everything that He's done for me, He was doing for me beforehand. It just wasn't clear to me. And how do I do that? What does that look like? What is my calling? What does He want me to be doing? What are the works that He prepared for me beforehand, for me to be doing today? What is that, how do I connect with what that is? And that was a journey that took me a good two years, honestly. I didn't have any quick answers. I was just hoping that God would come back and download it to me, speak to me like He did at the accident. But, you know what? There was some work that had to be done because He actually finally did that.

So as I'm lying there in bed and it was hard for me to read so I started listening to sermons. I started listening to audio books. I tried listening to podcasts. I just started spending time, you know, reading Scripture and trying to understand more about this God and Christ and the Holy Spirit and all these things that up to this point were not...I didn't have a lot of clarity on. And I just knew I was at that tech company and I was trying to run that company. They were incredibly benevolent, even though when I first got back to work I had to literally work four hours a week, two hours on a Tuesday, two hours on a Thursday. And they were accommodating me; they were paying my health benefits. I had a salary that was just enough for my family to live on. But I just knew in the back of my mind that there was something else. I could not tell you what it was. And it was during that period of time I met a good friend of both of ours, Jeff Spatafora, who's with the Half Time Institute and I decided to go through their program.

Chris: Half Time, many of our listeners are familiar with already. Bob Beaufort's wonderful book, Half Time, that talks about any of us reaching a midpoint kind of transition, whether it's crisis like this or just kind of waking up and realizing, "Hmm, I think I climbed the ladder that was maybe leaning against the wrong wall." Or maybe, "That was a wonderful season and now the kids are emptying out and a new season is before me." But it's a book that really challenges persons to examine, "Where am I in life and what is next?" And that whole book has turned into a movement. Half Time Institute and Jeff Spatafora, who runs the coaching division there. So, yeah, just

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plugging that in for our listeners. That's who you connected with at this point of seeking. You got into Half Time.

John: I did. And you know, it's sort of a process...it makes me think of the verse, "Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and His righteousness." I didn't know what those meant so, first of all, the kingdom, you know...Maybe I can explain kind of the process I went through that got me to such incredible clarity. First was just getting some understanding of who God was, and then how do I get into right standing, righteousness with that understanding. So who am I? And I remember I was with Jeff and he was coaching me and that was how I first got exposed to coaching. And I said, "You know, Jeff, I need to find out how I'm wired." And Jeff said, "I think you need to figure out how God wired you." And as I went through that process of actually looking at myself from God's perspective and not from my own human perspective with all my own filters and experiences in the background. But what does God see? And I just started getting some clarity on that identity. I started developing that relationship with Him.

I gotta tell ya, when I really dug in and understood, you know, my strengths, my gifts, my talents, what gave me energy, what my passions were. I went through that process. This is about two years in, I'll never forget it. I just felt like I had just made so much progress and all of the sudden, I'm in my prayer time and I hear God's voice again. And this was right before I ended up reaching out and talking with you, Chris. What God showed me was, "I want you to use this life I've given you to equip and inspire the leaders to work in my kingdom." And I had no clue what that even looked like. Like, okay, great. That's a great mission statement. What do I do with that one? [laughter]

So this was on a Saturday and on Monday morning I was meeting with a friend of mine. I was still working at this company, called Financial Designs. And I'll never forget this, my friend, very successful businessman here in town. He goes, "Hey, here's how I view my life right now. I've got these three pillars: business, my family, and my faith. And whatever I focus on does extraordinarily well and whatever I'm not

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focusing on, the other two, languish. I feel like the answer to pull all three of these together is right in front of me and I just can't get there." So he goes, "I've just decided to hire a coach and I think you should be a coach. And if you decide to do that, I'll be your first client." Now, I'm like...You know, other than working with Jeff Spatafora, I didn't know much about coaching and the coaching world so I reached out to a friend of mine, who's an executive coach. He's a Christian. We spent two and a half hours talking and he said, "I really think this is something you need to do. I don't tell that to many people but I'm telling you, this is God. Your whole life has prepared you to be doing this."

And here's the scary part about this, though, Chris. Here's a guy who at the time can work twenty hours a week, totally dependent on the salary from this company, and the healthcare benefits. And to really pursue a career in coaching, I would actually have to step away from that, cut the cord and step out totally in faith that I could actually develop a coaching practice and support my family because my wife is a physical therapist and she's been home with the kids for fifteen years. And because of the accident, now she has to go back to work. In Colorado, you have to retake the Boards to work in Colorado, if you haven't worked in five years. That's at least a year process so I knew she was at least eighteen months away from being able to do anything to support the family. That's where we were at when we had to make that decision. And that is, as you know, the decision that I made to cut the cord and step out completely on faith to go in this direction and I felt this is what God had called me to do.

Chris: Well, so, Kim, I know this is an awkward place to have to step in here but we know this conversation went more than an hour, probably ninety minutes of rich content here. So we're going to stop at this point and pick up again next time, huh?

Kim: Absolutely. I know our listeners probably want to bring their best selves to this conversation because John shared with us so many golden nuggets. So let's do that. Let's go ahead and cut this in half and pick up again next week.

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Chris: All right, gang. We will air the other half of this conversation next week and so, until then, keep raising the standard in changing the world.

Kim: And God's richest blessings to you.