Welcome to the third Johns Hopkins alumni book club of 2010. I am Jay Lenrow, graduate of the class of 1973 and an officer of the Alumni Council. We are here in the San Martin Center on the Homewood Campus in the new home of the Office of Alumni Relations on a picture perfect late-spring afternoon. Less than two weeks ago, the university celebrated its 134th commencement ceremonies on Homewood Field, where president Ronald J. Daniels conferred degrees on 6,323 graduates after hearing an inspirational talk by New York Mayor and Hopkins alumnus Michael Bloomberg.

It is a pleasure to introduce our faculty host, Professor Katrina McDonald of the sociology department; she will discuss this month’s selection, The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates by Wes Moore, a graduate of the Krieger School class of 2001 and University Trustee.

Mr. Moore recently appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show on April 27th, 2010, where he discussed his book, where, by the way, Ms. Winfrey gave every member of the audience a copy of the book to take home.

Dr. McDonald holds the title of Associate Dean of Multicultural Student Affairs and Associate Professor of Sociology. She became tenured in the spring of 2006, the second black female ever to be awarded tenure on the Homewood Campus. She regularly teaches courses on the African-American Family, Race, Racism and Racial Privilege, Researching Race, Class, and Gender, Qualitative Research Methods, and Introductory Social Statistics, to name a few. She serves on the board of the Center for Africana Studies and is a member of the Hopkins Diversity Leadership Council, the Maryland Humanities Council, the American Sociological Association, the Hopkins Population Center, and the Hopkins Black Faculty and Staff Association. Her recent book, Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity, and Contemporary Black Women, analyzes how contemporary black women’s ideas of black womanhood and sisterhood merge with social class status to shape certain attachments and detachments among them. In collaboration with Dr. Caitlin Cross-Barnett, Dr. McDonald has recently crafted new research on contemporary marriage among African Americans. She is also collaborating with Prof. Pamela Bennett for a study of minorities in the military. The book we will be discussing today is an engrossing tale of two young fatherless men and their mothers who are connected by name and neighborhood to show how family support, character, inner perseverance, personal responsibility, choices, and good fortune led one Wes Moore to become a Rhode Scholar and Brighthouse Scholar and the other Wes Moore to become a convicted murderer.

Please welcome Dr. Katrina McDonald.

KM:

Thank you.
Dr. McDonald, obviously you and I had the chance to speak a little bit before we started today, and what was particularly of interest to me is the fact that not only are you intimately knowledgeable about the book we're reviewing, but our Wes Moore was one of your students and a mentee: not only during his time here at Homewood but also his time at Oxford, and you've kept in regular touch with Wes since then. It would appear that the perspective you have of watching Wes grow from that young man from Baltimore through his years as an undergraduate, and watching him blossom, must have been particularly fulfilling for you. To watch someone so gifted start to fulfill his potential.

That's certainly true. Actually, Wes never took a course from me, but I remember him being introduced to me by another student-- I think it was one of our graduate students-- and I was immediately impressed with him as a person. He was just very soft-spoken, very respectful; we just clicked immediately and made a point to connect with each other any time we could and to share whatever was going on. He just struck me as a young man, who in telling me his history had overcome so much. I was just so proud to know he had come to that point, which was fairly early, and to see him graduate eventually and go off to Oxford… my favorite moment was when he e-mailed me from Oxford and said "You know, you're not going to believe this, but one of my good friends right now is Chelsea Clinton." And he says "When we go out to the pubs, everyone thinks I'm her bodyguard. They don't even assume that we're just friends." The picture of them was just hilarious to me, but I thought "What a privilege to be able to meet her and learn about her father through her, and all of that." And he eventually ended up in D.C, and it just seemed as if things unfolded as they should be with him. And I put him on a pedestal, I have to admit, I think he's one of the most amazing young men I have ever met. I hold him in great esteem, and when he told me he was working on this book, I was first taken aback thinking "Oh boy, he's taking on such a challenge," because I know how hard it was for me to write, but it was very clear that he was motivated to do something that was so dear to him. And so to hear that he had put together this project where he was laying these two men side-by-side was really fascinating. I got to read an early draft, and I knew it would be a special project in the end.

Reading the book and reading about Wes, I think it's fair to say that it was an honor for Chelsea Clinton to know him also.

(laughs) I know, it’s true.
JL:

Just one comment upon the book which stood out to me: This is from former senator and secretary of defense William S. Connel who said,

"Wes Moore is destined to become one of the most powerful and influential leaders of this century. You need only read this book to understand why."

When you have people like that who … who write so glowingly about him, you can see why you immediately took to him and became his friend.

KM:

Well I certainly applaud Oprah. I'm a major fan of hers. I love how she gives people a stage. She knows what she's doing, she know how she's opening up a world to that that person, and I'm so delighted that he had the opportunity to let the world know who he was on her stage. I think it's fantastic.

JL:

Let's start out talking a little bit about the book. Why don't we look at some passages that you believe really are representative of the author's writing and discuss why you personally chose those as representative passages.

KM:

Sure. I'm not sure that people would necessarily agree with me that I've picked the most representative; I think it's very subjective. But in this one passage I was really taken aback just by the last sentence, and it's something that I've carried with me and I will read it for you now.

JL:

Yes, thank you.

KM:

It’s fairly early in the book. It's page 66. He says, and I think this is a theme that runs throughout the book:

"'When did you feel you'd become a man?' Wes asked me, a troubled look on his face. 'I think it was when I first felt accountable to people other than myself. When I first cared that my actions mattered to people other than just me.' I answered quickly and confidently but I wasn't too sure what I was talking about. When I did actually become a man? There was no official ceremony that brought my childhood to an end. Instead, crises or other circumstances presented me with adult-sized responsibilities and obligations that I had to meet one way or another. For some boys this happens later, in their late teens, or even twenties, allowing them to grow
organically into adulthood. But for some of us, the promotion to adulthood, or at least its challenges, is so jarring, so sudden, that we enter into it unprepared, and might be undone by it.

Wes, feeding off my answer, attempted to finish my thought.

"Providing for others isn't easy. And the mistakes you make trying are pretty unforgiving.' He paused. I waited. He rubbed his chin, softly pulling at the long strands of his goatee with his fingers. "And second chances are pretty fleeting.'

"What do you mean? From everything you told me, both of us did some pretty wrong stuff when we were younger, and both of us had second chances. But if the situation or the context where you make the decisions don't change, then second chances don't mean too much.'

Wes and I stared at each other for a moment, surrounded by the evidence that some kids were forced to become adults prematurely. These incarcerated men, before they’d even reached a point of basic maturity had flagrantly and tragically squandered the few opportunities they’d had to contribute productively to something greater than themselves.

I sat back, allowing Wes's words to sink in. Then I responded, 'I guess it's hard sometimes to distinguish between second chances and last chances.'"

JL:

That's a fascinating, introspective comment. So much of the book seems to be our Wes viewing his past and almost pondering why he ended up where he is, when he perhaps easily could have been the other Wes. But as you noted when we were speaking earlier, there is so much innate to an individual that determines whether they will succeed or not. You can have two children raised in the same family by the same parents in the same schooling that end up very different places. That is probably one of the more introspective comments he has in the book.

KM:

And it's not clear if the question is really being put to one or the other. I think the question is one that either of the men could have offered in a sense. I think that a lot of young black men, and I think a lot of black folks in particular, lean on what I call an old kind of Christian adage, which is "There go I, by but the grace of God," the notion that I could have been any one of those people as I'm walking down the street and see the prostitute or drug addict or wife-beater, whatever. And say "That could have been me." But God somehow chose that I be saved from that. And whether you truly believe that God intervenes in that way is not quite the point. The point is in recognizing that you're not as privileged as you may think. You're not as protected as you think. Yes, you can look at yourself, "I was able to avoid it," but you know it just takes a turn of the die in a certain situation to have led you possibly into that same pit. And it's a powerful moment I've had many times when I've looked in the face of a young black girl. I remember--I'll tell you a story-- I remember when I was in graduate school in the beginning of
my second year, and I was very pregnant. I was walking across the campus and stopped cold in my steps, and I said, "Oh my God, I'm having a black boy; what I was thinking having a black boy. Just the very idea that I was going to bring a black boy into the world, and I was going to have to get that boy to age twenty-one, was frightening, because I knew it wasn't just going to be about what I did for him that was going to get him through. It was going to take a lot of people giving him the positive guide, and I had to pray that they would come. It was very frightening for me to raise a boy. I did a foolish thing; I went to the movies to see "Boys in the Hood," a very popular movie in the late 80's. It's a movie about L.A gang-culture and about one boy who gets through, who eventually goes off to college, a boy and a girl. Again, I came out of the movie theater--my son was maybe 18 months old, and I came out just weeping. And my husband just couldn't console me. He said "Katrina, what's wrong with you?" And I said, "We have two black boys!" I had my stepson and my child. I kept thinking, "How are we going to get them safely through?" And so the journey for black boys is really tough, and we're always joyous to see the ones that get through. And it isn't necessarily because of their poor choices. They try to make the best choices they can often, and somebody trips them up, and tells them they can do something they're not supposed to do, or whatever it be. But for parents I think it is really, really challenging. And you have to a lot of faith that it’s going to be okay.

JL:

And just think about that--you and your husband--two highly educated people, being concerned about that.

KM:

Scared to death.

JL:

And to imagine what it's like for someone who never finished high school, with a son who never really knew his father, living in poverty… if it's frightening for you, how much more frightening must it be for them.

KM

Well I'm not sure… as a sociologist of course I understand the effect social class can have on the opportunities and choices available; I understand that perfectly. But I also understand that those people for instance who don't have as much education also don't know what the pitfalls are. Do you know what I'm saying?

JL:

They don't know enough to be afraid.
KM:

And some boys-- they just go through life doing what life does. Getting up in the morning and cooking eggs... they don't necessarily see what could be lurking around the corner other than the most obvious dangers. I grew up in poverty myself; poverty then is a little different, poverty in the early 1960’s and 70’s, than poverty now.

JL:

It wasn't as dangerous...

KM:

It wasn't the same kind of poverty. I wasn't mired in it. It didn't hold me back. It made my mother worry about whether we were going to eat and things like that, but I was still a very active girl in my church and my school. I did well-- I was a straight A student-- because my family made it so. The family made it so, despite the little that we had. Poverty wasn't as fearful because it didn't come with gang violence. It didn't come with drug addictions. It didn't come with all those other things. It was just poverty. Today it's a whole different ballgame. Because I worry, for instance, about children who have to deal with such things in their homes every morning before they go off to school. It's hard for me to imagine-- I've never been in that position-- but I ache for the children who have to navigate that just to get out of the door to show up to school on time. That's a whole different ballgame. Yeah, we may have had some drunk folk back in the day, but it was nothing like we are experiencing today.

JL:

Is there another passage that particularly...

KM:

Yeah, this is a shorter one that I just thought was cute in a way (laughs). This is the other Wes speaking, I believe. It talks about how he spent the next seven months building his daughter a house from scratch--his little daughter.

"He sandpapered every board, hammered every nail, leveled every edge. When it was finished, the house stood five feet high and arms length across. It included shutters, doors, windows; it was by far the most complex project in the group."

The group being that he was being trained in the prison to be an artisan of some sort.

"When it was finished it sat in the display room along with the projects of his classmates including wooden plaques and plain boxes someone called a telephone base. To Wes, the house was more than just a project to complete. It was a daily reminder of why he was there. These past months have been the most important and enjoyable of his life. He learned skills, gained
confidence, and finally felt that his life could go on in a different direction. He stayed at the job course center so he could provide a better life for his kids. He stayed for his mother, who had sat home watching Tony, his brother, continue moving in and out of the criminal justice system. He stayed at the job course center for himself.

So this is the other Wes, who took the simple things and tried to make them count. Unfortunately, he didn't get the benefits that our Wes friend did, but in that passage, you really see him trying to structure his life in a way that can help him succeed. And what may seem simple to the rest of us was obviously very huge for him.

JL:

One of the other comment threads was the lack of a father in the home, and I think that the day after it aired on Oprah Winfrey, our Wes was interviewed by NPR. He was talking with Michelle Norris, who raised the issue of father and said, "Is it a key for boys to have consistent authority figures who are also guides in their eyes? I guess I was thinking that because your father died when you were very young, but he was there in the very early years. Not so for the other Wes." Our Wes's response, I thought, was fascinating. Fascinating. He said, "Absolutely, yeah." And he said, "You know, there's actually a part in the book where Wes and I are talking about our fathers, and he said something that I thought was very true. 'Your father wasn't there because he couldn't be, my father wasn't there because he chose not to be. Therefore, we're going to mourn their absences differently.'" And boy, is that a telling comparison. Reading that, it made me even sadder about the other Wes because it showed that here's a young man who obviously was too bright to have ended up where he was. Just that statement indicated that he had some real insight. And maybe, as you said, it came too late. Your line about the second chance versus the last chance...

But it showed that he did have some true insight.

KM:

Definitely. He certainly analyzed that nicely. I teach a course on the African American family. And actually, this past semester was one of the best classes I had in 14 years. I just thought I had a great group of students. Always, always, always: our conversations end up pondering this concern about the lack of black men in the lives of women and then in the roles of father. It is an issue that really haunts the community. I think that young people today are adamant to turn around, to be honest. I see signs--very unscientifically, I should say--I have observed young couples getting married earlier than they did twenty years ago. And I'm reading that as them saying, "I can do this. I can do this, and I can have children young, and I can stick with them the whole time." And I'm hoping if not the 2010, the 2020 census shows some change there. The absence of fathers is very potent and it’s been difficult for me as a staunch feminist to claim that men really make all that difference.
I'll have to ask my wife about that.

(KM:

(laughs) Well some of that for me comes I know from that I never had a father. I've never
known my father, and I don't know whether of the two responses to 'why father,' I don't know
which one applies to me. I don't know if he didn't want to be with us or couldn't. I don't know.
For many years, I didn't care, because I had a fascinatingly loving family. I was well, well taken
care of by my mother and grandmother, by my aunt, and by my cousins. I never felt a loss. Not
until I had my son. And he began to say, "Do I have a granddaddy?" And I thought, "Oh my
god, I don't have an answer." Then I became keenly aware of the significance that a father can
have, even having not had that experience. And I certainly knew I wanted that for my son. So I
have worked very hard since he was a baby to help nurture the relationship between him and his
father. And I did marry his father, and we're still married today for sixteen years. But the father
figure is huge, especially for boys I think. Especially for boys. I think girls and mothers go
together in ways that you would think. Not that all girls get along with their mothers. But I
think there is a bond there that is unique as the bond between boys and fathers. At the same
time, you know, I know black men--this is just my terrible bias-- black men who adore their
daughters (laughs). You know, adore their daughter. But at the same time, it's different. You
don't think of black girls so much strain as much due to a poor relationship with their father, but
you see boys kind of fall off the cliff. So you have to be careful. Even as I talk about the
differences between boys and girls, they're not that vast. We're concerned for both boys and girls
as they relate to the fathers. But we know that in a home, boys need to understand what
manhood is about, and women cannot always tell them. We try, but can't always.

(JL:

With your sociologist background, one of the things that just kept running through the back of
my mind as I'm reading Wes Moore's words were… I was just drawing comparisons to 'survivor
guilt.' To those people. One of my wife's dear friends worked for Marsh & McLennan and the
day of 9/11--their offices were in one of the towers-- he had taken his daughter to school, and it
was a pretty day, so he just decided-- something he had never done before-- to walk to work
from her school. And he said, "I can be a little delayed." Every one of the 43 people that
reported to him died, and he wasn't in the building. For the longest time, he had that 'survivor
guilt.' And so I was going through the back of my mind and thinking how our Wes Moore, as
he's going through this, really has some similar types of thoughts.

(KM:

No doubt. I think I saw some of that in Wes as I knew him years ago. Not that he would talk
about it or lamented, but there was just something… well he had to have said something, but
something led me to believe that that was certainly something that he carried. And the other boys that he hung out with that I knew were similarly that way. I think just about any black boy who's in college feels that way. Realizing that they are one of few. It's rough. I think for me it came up again when I was in graduate school and pregnant, I was doing research on young pregnancy. I was doing a lot of qualitative interviews in the homes of pregnant women. A lot of round women. And there was this one Hispanic girl, seventeen or so, who was pregnant. She had an African American boyfriend who was pretty abusive to her, wasn't the best guy, but she loved him. I spent a lot of time with her; I was really drawn to her, so even outside of the work of the research I would see her. And I was struck again one day cold when I realized that "Oh my God, is she looking at me thinking it's going to be able to survive this? Here I am, a P.H.D student, making 50,000 dollars a year. I have a home, a car, insurance: I have all the things that make it possible for me to be a mom. She didn't." And I freaked out thinking, "Oh my God, am I sending her signals?" I just freaked out. I suddenly felt that I was a horrible role model; knowing that I would survive this, and not sure that she would, was rough. So I certainly know the feelings of survivor guilt, I've had them in other contexts. I think that, shoot, any African American who had "made it" feels it on some level.

JL:
Are there any particular issues that you think is going to spur our readers to get into a really good discussion online back and forth? Ideally, what would you like to see them debating?

KM:
See them talk about? You know, it's funny. I think people that know Baltimore well will debate whether or not it captured the reality of Baltimore City well. I was fascinated by some of the passages: they got you to really paint that picture of Baltimore life. One of my favorite ones is Chinkipen Elementary School and them calling it "Chicken Pen." And I found out people still do. I said that to my son the other day and he said, "You didn't know we called it Chicken Pen?" I thought that was hilarious. I think people will debate whether he captured Baltimore accurately in his story because Baltimoreans care very much. Particularly those who've lived here all their lives. I don't know if you know how territorial Baltimoreans, black Baltimoreans, are. About the East side and the West side…

JL:
Yeah, they don't like each other, the East side and the West side.

KM:
Yeah, I'm not sure how genuine that hate is, or it's just in fun, but it's potent. But some of the debates will be among people who know the city: whether he captured the reality of the city accurately. I thought he did a pretty good job though. And then there was the reality of
something else: let me just say this. I was a little taken aback--and I would say this to Wes if he was sitting here now--I was a little taken aback by the detail he was able to give in some of these historical passages. Let's say it's the other Wes Moore and the book is a description about him coming into contact with this person and this happened I thought, "How did they remember those details?" It's very detailed. I don't know if I can remember that much detail. You understand what I'm saying? I'm not denying the ability of someone else to, but I was fascinated that in the two men talking to each other they could draw out such specific detail of encounters they had with each other. Being chased down the street by this mean kid, or whatever it was. It was so vivid, and it was all recall. It was just amazing.

JL:

There's another passage in Wes's interview with Michelle Norris, and he said "When you start your day reading a letter from someone who is going to spend the rest of their life in person. When you start your day like that, it really helps you to think about your day. It humbles you. And I do think about the blessings that I had. The family, and I do feel like I'm lucky, and I'm sincerely thankful. Which ties into everything we've been discussing. Is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you think the readers would be interested in knowing about this book?

KM:

In knowing about this book...well I think people will in some ways want to know more about his motivation. In one way it's kind of obvious. You meet someone with your same name. And you have the opportunity to pick their brain and reconcile for yourself, "How did I not end up there?" But beyond that I think people might ponder the other part of the motivations that are larger intent. The way he ends the book with the particular epilogue he does. He clearly feels strongly about helping to divert tragedy among other young black boys. It's almost like a call to judgment in terms of getting people up and ready for this fight. I know that myself--I'll tell you what was one of my fantasy projects. Again, I worry about children who get up every morning and could do fascinatingly well, could be a Wes Moore tomorrow, if they had the right environment. I'm fascinated with the idea of urban boarding schools. Absolutely fascinated. Wish I had the money today. Because I think that being able to school children who are in difficult situations in a boarding school with great educators and great social workers and great other adults who love them, but keeping them fairly close to their communities: not taking them out somewhere in the country in a boarding school there. Keeping them in their cities. But having an environment where together those children learn how to support each other. How we're going to get up every morning and make sure our rooms are clean. How we're going to make sure that our homework is done together. That collective thing is fascinating to me. So this book kind of reminded me to some solutions out there that we need to give some serious thought to. Now that's not a novel idea on my part at all. I can't think of the gentlemen's name right now, but there are two brothers, I believe, who started something very close to that in
Washington D.C. And they have recently put together a school in South Baltimore, I believe. And they hope to include a residential section. And I'm fascinated by this idea because I think it is the answer. I think it is the answer to helping children who are in dire circumstances with negative influences in their homes, whether it be their parents' alcoholism or drug addiction, or brother's being involved in the drug market. We need to get the kids out of that environment. We need to put them in a loving environment where they can still have contact with their families here and there. But where they are there focused on maturing, and learning how to be independent. All those kinds of things. I'd love to see urban boarding schools pop up all over the country and I think we could really turn things around.

JL:

Ideally, what would you like to see the readers come away with when they read this book?

KM:

Well, I don't think you can not come away with the feeling of gratitude involved for those of us who are succeeding. Just amazing gratitude that I did not fall under the pressures that this world has to give. I think there will be some shame, about all of the times you got away with it (laughs). All of us have done things where we know, had I not just done that, then that situation could have been my situation. I could have been pregnant at thirteen, I could have been this. And you can't help but to be grateful that it didn't happen. I mean that's how I feel when I read it. For those who are still suffering who might read this, I just pray that the book helps them understand what circumstance is, that you can be brilliantly successful in the midst of mass… you know, it can happen. I think there are some people who won't get this book because they will have never experienced either side at all. They might not fully appreciate it, I think. But for those of us who have touched on success and touched on dire failure, I think they can appreciate the book for the hope it brings. I think that Wes Moore himself is one of the most hopeful people on the planet. I love him so, because he is so positive all the time and he's so giving all the time. I don't want to put too much pressure on him, I don't want him to feel like he owes the world too much, because he is an individual man and he does need to live for himself and breathe, because now he's on this big stage, and you know what big stages can do to people. So I pray that he stays grounded. So I guess, if nothing else, people will get to know that this man exists in the world, and they'll be happy to know that there is somebody about there who is tender enough to tell the story, and to want to help people have hope. That no matter how bad things can be in childhood, you can choose to press on into great adulthood.

JL:

Thank you, Professor McDonald. You've given us a tremendous amount to think about. To our participants, I'd like to remind you that during the months of June and July, Professor McDonald will be posting about six questions on the website for an online discussion, and don't be surprised when she chimes in and leads the discussion one way or the other as she offers some of her own
insight. I'll close by just saying I understood what you just said about not having personal experience with Wes's story, but I couldn't help think about the universality of this. If you're in a family other than the fairy tale family; from Lake Woebegone, where all the women are good looking and the children are above average, to those of us in the real world, in all our families, we've seen people that have faced more challenges than others. And they might not be the same challenges as the two Wes Moores, but they are challenges indeed that everyone faces. So thank you; this has been fascinating.

KM:

Thank you.