

Episode 149-- Showing Up for Wendi Winters

Fri, 9/24 10:38AM 34:11

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mom, gun violence, people, gun violence prevention, life, guns, weapon, lost, killed, difficult, shooting, brady, incredibly, gun control, home, tik tok, situation, journalists, office, community

SPEAKERS

Summerleigh Winters Geimer, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson



JJ Janflone 00:08

This is the legal disclaimer where I tell you that the views, thoughts and opinions shared on this podcast belong solely to our guests and hosts and not necessarily Brady or Brady's affiliates. Please note this podcast contains discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. It's okay we find it disturbing too. Hey everybody JJ here and welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue and Brady. If you're waiting for the beautiful voice of Kelly, alas, I'm flying solo this week. But I am joined by a really phenomenal guest Summerleigh Winters Geimer. Summerleigh is a phenomenal young activist who unfortunately got involved in gun violence prevention after the murder of her mother Wendy Winters, who was killed in a mass shooting at her place of work, the Capitol Gazette newsroom in 2018. Summerleigh is with me to talk about Wendy's life, her legacy, Summerleigh's amazing work on TikTok, and you know what life is like after a loss like this.



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 01:22

Hi, everyone, my name is Summerleigh Winters Geimer. I'm a gun violence prevention activist. And I unfortunately became one after I lost my mom, Wendy Winters to gun violence in the deadliest mass shooting in a newsroom in American history. I spend probably 50% of my life talking about my mom now. I'm fine with that. I love her very much. And I miss her every day. So I'm glad that this is the way that I can remember her. She was an amazing journalist. She had many careers in her life. And she ultimately settled on being a community journalist, getting to know our community of Annapolis, and forming these really great connections. So then when we lost her, it was a huge hit to the community and to the journalism community in our hometown.



JJ Janflone 02:09

So in what I feels as a very 2021 sentence, I want to say to everyone, I found you via your advocacy work on tik tok, which is, I think, a new medium for this sort of activism.



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 02:20

Yeah, choosing to start talking about the shooting on Tik Tok was probably one of the more difficult decisions I've ever made. I mean, the internet is out there. More specifically social media, it's just the wild west of advocacy. Even at

ever made. I mean, the internet is cutthroat. More specifically social media, it's just the wild west of advocacy. Except I'm pretty sure the Wild West had stricter gun laws. And it just it's a different format where it's you know, user facing, there are people that are able to comment in real time on my videos, or post hurtful comments as soon as I post or later on. And so it, it's definitely not how I saw myself posing my advocacy, but it's probably one of the better ways to reach younger generations, and I'm in the youngest generation. So it is me talking to my people. And I really respect the work of those that are able to go lobby and create more exceptional views and documentaries and you know, in depth YouTube videos and all kinds of media and books that are created, I 100% respect those and use those in my research. But when it comes to just giving younger generations information it's sometimes just best to use social media as much as it is sometimes the worst. And I've come to find that and I I try and prioritize giving myself breaks when I want to, which is a lot, so it's just not always fun. But I've come to find I'm reaching wider audiences that I probably would have struggled to reach through other formats



JJ Janflone 04:17

And that's got to be hard to because you're you're sharing you know, photos of you and your mom, you're talking about your mom's life, you know, and the trial and everything else, you know, it's very personal content.



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 04:28

Really, me on tik tok is kind of me trying to take back that documentation of my life that my mom used to do. I mean, she was an artist and we always joke, so my older siblings have a lot of like watercolor paintings and drawings of them that my mom has done. I mean when I say a lot, I mean they each probably have like two because they take a lot of time. And I have 1000s of photographs. And so the joke is that she switched mediums because she just, she loved us so much. I don't even have a lot of pictures of us together, because she was always the one behind the camera. So I really cherish those pictures we have, especially these ones from my high school graduation, which are probably some of the last like real kind of family photos of us together. And you can tell that she's whispered something weird in my ear. And I'm like squirming in the picture. And we're just like laughing. So she was just always there, the people always say Wendy would show up, she might be late, she will be late, you have to lie to her and tell her it's 30 minutes earlier than it actually is. But she would show up. And that was really powerful for me, you know, it just made me feel really loved as a teenager. And sometimes it felt a little weird, because she might be the only parent that would show up to something for seniors, you know, because we're seniors, we all drove ourselves here. And at the time, I think I was a little embarrassed. But now I know that while my mom is probably missing out on like, 60 to 80% of my life, she still saw a lot of that 20%. And she loved it. And I have her documentations in her Facebook posts. So I'm just very grateful that she was a loving parent. And it makes it really hard to grieve, losing someone that was just so loving that radiated this love towards you and wanted to know everything about you and be in your life. And it's kind of like losing that cheerleader.



JJ Janflone 06:45

So I'm going to ask a really awful and traumatizing question, which is that for our listeners who aren't familiar with what happened, I'm wondering if as much as you're comfortable if you can share with us what happened to your mom and her co-workers.



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 07:03

I mean, that's probably every day. On June 28 2018, pretty much the past, probably three years prior of planning came to a head for the shooter, and he stormed my mom's office and killed five people. And there were only 11 people in the office that day, he was actually expecting there to be somewhere close to 20, he thought there was

people in the office that day, he was actually expecting there to be somewhere close to 30, he thought there was going to be a community event that day where the editorial board was going to be meeting it was just around election time. So he thought politicians would be there. And he truly wanted to just kill as many people as possible in a way that hurt the paper. He could have gone somewhere else and killed more people if he wanted to. But he very much wanted to target the newspaper. And something that I didn't really know until trial was that he pretty much knew everyone that he killed. He had researched the paper, he researched the people that work there, what kind of columns they wrote. And he just wanted journalists to die. And he succeeded. And he severely hindered the newspaper from that point forward. They've done an amazing job putting out the paper. But it's definitely taken away a lot of senior leaders at the paper, most of the people he killed were journalists for 20 years, they had a lot of experience. They were editors. And so now there's this new generation of people affected by gun violence, and they're so young, and they still have a lot to learn. It's just the newspaper itself has had issues, I mean, they have closed the office. So and that really hurts our causes, because we want to support the paper as much as possible. And they've actually recently like closed the office completely everyone works remotely or from the Baltimore Sun office. And it just hurts because this pillar of our community was kind of pushed over the edge by the shooting in a way that no one would have expected.



JJ Janflone 09:10

Yeah, from everything I've read it, it seems very much like the Capitol Gazette office was sort of a community hub, you know, it wasn't this sort of closed off and separate office space.



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 09:19

Right. And I mean, they even did interviews in the office. My mom's last interview was less than 30 minutes before the shooting. And she was actually interviewing her teen of the week, who was a local advocate for the chapter of March for Our Lives. And so that was, you know, incredibly terrifying for that young girl. She could have been there in the office when this all happened. The fact that there weren't visitors in the office at all, is an anomaly. I used to go visit my mom around 2:30 in her office when I would get out of school. I mean, this was the middle of summer. So in some ways, I'm incredibly grateful. That no one else was there. Because this could have been a real tragedy past just journalists, this could have been a huge community tragedy where we could have lost even more people,



JJ Janflone 10:11

If you're comfortable too, I think it'd be really important for our listeners, if we talk about what life is like, after a loss like this, you know, it's not that a shooting is over, and then bam, the situation is over, there's a lot that comes along, after a shooting,



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 10:27

I would probably put myself in her shoes, I would rather she be here today than me in a lot of ways, you know, be there for my siblings and for her grandson. So I'm not saying I don't value my life, but I'm saying I really miss her value in our lives, like her collective value in our lives, has just created this massive hole. And it just, gun violence is so unfair. And I mean, she charged at the shooter, her last actions, were protecting her coworkers. I think that's really all I could ask for a demonstration of my mom, is her final moments. And it really sucks because I have nightmares of the crime scene photos. But usually it's not a nightmare. Usually, I'm awake, and they are right in front of my eyes.

And just seeing how helpless run, like how being shot makes you look so helpless, is really shocking. I mean, my mom was six feet tall. And seeing her there was it made her look like a different person than what her last moments actually were.



JJ Janflone 11:49

And I really do appreciate you sharing so much about your mom and being so open, because I think it is going to help a lot of people. And I'm just perpetually impressed with how I think great you are at breaking down these really difficult concepts for people in a quick way. I mean, like even on I'm thinking of your Tik Tok when you've got like 60 seconds or less, right. And I'm wondering if we can dig in to some of the I think myths or some of the big issues that you've dug into with your account? You know, starting with that question, would it have been different if someone in the office was armed, you know, the terrible Wayne Lapierre, quote, if only there had been like a good guy with a gun there.

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 12:32

I get that comment a lot, a lot. Outside, people love to victim blame. And my response has stayed the same over the years. And that's that my mom had a right as an American citizen to be safe at work. While she also has a right to carry a weapon, she also has the right not to carry a weapon. And I think that's something where it really should not be this use it or lose it idea where well if you are not carrying, it's your fault, if you are attacked, you were in an unsafe situation. And that's a really ridiculous mindset. Because even if you are someone who carries a weapon all day, every day, you can still get injured, we see cops that get shot, our troops overseas, they get attacked and they get killed. And if you get injured, is it now your fault? Or is it the perpetrators fault? Is it the system that allowed them to get that weapon? Is it their fault? So I really don't stand for anyone that's going to victim blame my mom. And I've started to get a little bit aggressive on my page, where I just say keep my mom's name out of your mouth. Get off my page. If you comment on this again, I'll block you because it's a ridiculous sentiment and I can only defend I can only repeat it so many times before it just becomes an echo chamber. And even if she had the option to be carrying at work, she still wouldn't. My mom did not like guns. She I mean she saw way too much in her lifetime to consider guns a necessity in her life. And she I mean she this was the mass shooting she died in and wasn't even the first one to touch her life. So she just she wouldn't have done it anyways and she still has a right to be safe. It's we really shouldn't be victim blaming in situations like this. Especially when someone plans out and executes an attack with military style door barricades with smoke bombs with shotgun shells that can flame throw 30 feet. At what point is it a little bit ridiculous to assume even an armed citizen could have stopped some of the events of that day.



JJ Janflone 14:58

Where does that end to right? Like do I need to full, military Gundam style outfit to go to the grocery store to be safe?

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 15:07

It can be so weird like when it's just like why, like, What if you were to get into an altercation, and then you're so upset, and you have this weapon on you, you have one in the chamber, and you you lose control of yourself? And now this person whose whole idea of life was that they were going to be protecting themselves has now injured someone else unnecessarily. And so I think that can be where my mind goes sometimes. Are we really going to put untrained civilians in a situation where they have a weapon, and they could hurt someone? So I think, you know, I'm not totally against concealed carry. But I do think you really need to be trained if you're going to be able to have a

weapon concealed on your body for situations where tempers could run high. And I think that's where my fear would come in, wouldn't necessarily be a mass shooting could happen, and hopefully there's someone there with a concealed weapon. My concern is, who has a concealed weapon? And are they trained enough? Or do they have enough self control? I mean, even our police officers, they have training, and they still lose their cool in situations and have killed unarmed civilians. So it's, it's really difficult for me to look at those situations and think more people should have weapons.



JJ Janflone 16:22

Another thing I think that you've really tackled well in your activism is responding to folks who, for some reason seem to think that shootings like this are a hoax.

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 16:33

Yeah, that's probably been one of the weirder aspects of being thrust into the public light, has been being accused of being like a plant. And, first of all, that would be incredibly difficult, because I've probably been on social media since I was 12. So unless I am some kind of sleeper agent, that would surprise me, because I mean, with a lot of these things, the internet is so pervasive, you can find anyone, it's extremely easy to disprove. But to initially say it and plant that seed of doubt in people is very powerful. And they know that the people that are saying that know that I'm not a paid actor, they know that. But to confuse other people that are like, Oh, my God, this is so horrible, and then see a comment that's like, this is a paid actor. I've seen her somewhere. You plant that seed of doubt in someone's mind that maybe, maybe this isn't what it seems maybe this is something else. And this is somebody else's agenda. And not the very clear circumstance. That it is.



JJ Janflone 17:43

I think one of the things that comes up with that is like to give folks the benefit of the doubt is I think sometimes, especially folks who haven't been through it, they want to believe that because it's almost kinder in their head to them to think that like, oh, there's this vast conspiracy, and it's made up. Than to think that like, you know, my loved ones could go to work, or my loved ones could go to school and not come home. So it's almost an easier, I think, brain jump for them.

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 18:07

It can be I mean, it's probably easier to assume that someone above you is tricking you than the actual reality that with the way the country is right now, a lot of people aren't safe when they go to work. A lot of mass shootings that have hit the media, in the past three years have been at workplaces. I mean, even here in Wisconsin, about two years ago, there was the shooting at the Miller Lite factory. And then there was the FedEx factory earlier this year. So workplaces are a huge area where people go every day, they feel safe. And things can happen. Except a lot of the reasons that people are getting injured at work with guns could probably be prevented with some form of gun control.



JJ Janflone 18:55

Speaking of that, can we talk about things that you would like to see changed, or some of the things that you would like to see changed?

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 19:03

A lot of my advocacy for gun control is very much a case study on what happened to my mom, I'm sure there are a lot of options for how we could pursue gun control. But in terms of what happened to my mom, the path to how he got his hands on that weapon was very clear. And it came out in court exactly his plan. And he really should not have had access to that weapon in the state of Maryland, a red flag law, which would have captured his previous guilty plea to like criminal harassment should have captured his application for a shotgun and he should have been denied.



JJ Janflone 19:48

And I'm going to break in really quick to just for listeners who aren't aware what a red flag law is, if that's okay, because I think what you mean by a red flag law is an ERPO a extreme risk protection order which is like a formalized process that prevents a person who is in crisis from harming themselves or others by temporarily removing firearms from their possession and prohibiting them from purchasing more. I don't like that term "red flag" just because it seems to stigmatize folks with with mental illness. And the issue isn't isn't trying to harm folks going through a crisis, it's actually, you know, trying to prevent folks from being harmed. So I think it's just like an important distinction. But it's got to be super frustrating for you to, to know that there's laws out there to go like, Oh my gosh, like this, this would have helped this could have prevented this from happening. I imagine too, it's got to be frustrating, because I've seen this in your tiktoks, when you're talking about how you support gun safety laws, but folks think that that means that you're, you know, very anti gun, or something like that.

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 20:47

So, you know, people can assume that I just want to take away all guns. And I'm not saying that. When my mom was killed, I used to recreationally shoot guns, at least one weekend, a month, I had a shotgun under my bed and a handgun under the couch. And I was someone who was around guns and still, I wanted to make sure that they were secured wherever you were keeping them at least away from children, and that you had to be registered, and you had to pass a background check. Even when I was a gun owner, I still felt that way. I'm not a gun owner anymore. And it's not necessarily that I'm scared of the guns, it's just that I don't feel like they are necessary in my home. And most of my biggest threat to my life would be my, my partner killing me at home. So I would just say, for the most part, a lot of gun violence activists have very specific goals in mind. In that undermining their cause by assuming they want America to be completely gun free, is incredibly naive. And it's very, it's very much gaslighting from the gun lobby, they are tricking gun owners into believing that the other side wants to take away their guns. And that's just not correct. I can pass a background check. And if I wanted to purchase a weapon, I could. And I do believe that there should be a wait time before I can purchase that weapon. But when it comes down to it, someone with a gun killed my mom and four of her co workers and he should not have had that weapon. And that is very much where my advocacy is pointed, is just at those red flag laws. And at those long gun laws that fly under the radar where you don't have to have a background check to resale some weapons. Like the gun show loophole, that thing drives me crazy.



JJ Janflone 22:45

On sort of that language thing, too. I wonder why you use the phrase gun control rather than gun violence prevention? Can I ask what that is?

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 22:55

I would say one of the reasons I would probably call it gun control is because that's what my mom used to call it. She was a huge, huge gun violence prevention activist. And probably a lot of the language she used to use was gun control. I mean, I'm trying to remember I have her like old Million Mom March shirts still from like 2002. I do think there's a point where gun control and gun violence prevention, there is a line between them. So I think before the gun violence occurs, it can be considered gun control what laws could have stopped this from happening. And then there's also gun violence prevention where if someone is having a mental health crisis, or if there's a child in the home the weapon should be locked away and kept away from the children, there are lines where those can be drawn in between those two uses of the word that sometimes can mean the same thing. But one thing to keep in mind is that besides just mass shootings, a lot of the people we are losing to gun violence is children and people that are being killed in their own homes, intimate partner violence, accidental shootings, suicide. So there's a point where it stops being gun control and it becomes gun violence prevention where laws won't necessarily stop it. It does need to be a little bit more individual responsibility of how can we keep the other people in our home safe? How can we keep ourselves safe at home with firearms? And that's something where if you look at statistics, it can be incredibly scary how many children are just killed by gun violence? It's terrifying because what can we do as a society to protect these children that shouldn't even be in that situation? I just I struggle with those statistics and knowing just how many people we're losing a day to it and how much of it is also homicide. Where it is very much intentional, or when it's a mass shooting? And why? Why we are getting to that point, and why we think more guns are the solution to people purposely killing another person with a gun?



JJ Janflone 25:17

No, I'm so glad that you mentioned that. Because the rates at which we lose people, and how so many in the US are affected by gun violence, like the ripples of that I think is just huge. And one of the things that I think you've also talked a lot about beautifully, is how again, it's not just that a shooting ends, and then it's fine is that this stuff continues. You know, for example, it's it's been three years since your mom was taken, and you all are still going through the process with the trial and everything like that.

S

Summerleigh Winters Geimer 25:48

Yeah, pending the trial was very difficult. My, one of my sisters was unable to attend at all, because she has a newborn well like a year now, but he'll always be tiny to me. So she didn't get to really see any of that we had to recap it to her, which just was horrifying. To recap some of the details that we found out. And my brother, he's stationed overseas, so he only got to see a week of the trial. But me and my sister really hunkered down and sat through all three weeks. And that that was incredibly difficult. You know, she's been my best friend for 23 years. And none of that time spent together was enjoyed really, it was it was like going to a job we hated every single day, day in and day out. And it became really difficult for me, because when all of this happened, I lived in Maryland, I lived near my mom. And I was actually the only one of my siblings that lived still in our home state. And so at the time, it wasn't difficult, really, to drop everything and be there. But since you know, the shooting happened over three years ago, I've moved out of state, I've tried to continue on with my life in a way that I can still go home, but I just I don't live there anymore. So taking three weeks off of work for an event that, since I've moved so far away they aren't familiar with was very difficult to discuss with management. I mean, it was I was awkward. I have to sit down with my boss and explain to them well, you know, I'm a great employee, and I do my job, there's this incredibly dark past behind me that I have to go address. Which in some ways was positive, because now my co workers probably understand me a little bit better they a lot of them followed the trial while I was gone and came back and we're like, I'm so happy, you're back. And I'm so happy things worked out in your favor. But it's just going to always be logistically difficult. And it really is tough to go back somewhere where everything hurts. I don't even know if I really refer to Maryland as

home anymore. I mean, it just is so traumatic to be there and have those like flashbulb moments all the time. So it wasn't fun, but I'm glad it's almost over. And I'll say my piece at the victim impact statement portion of the sentencing. And then I kind of am ready to not have to travel for it anymore. Not gonna stop talking about it, but I'm happy to not have to show up for a guy that doesn't care about me.



JJ Janflone 28:47

And as you keep talking and being an advocate and sort of speaking for your mom, what, what is that like for you internally,



Summerleigh Winters Geimer 28:56

I've kind of stepped into this role as her voice when she had a much more powerful voice than I did. And she was way better at it. I mean, she was an advocate before I was born for gun violence prevention. I mean my screensaver on my phone is literally her and I at the Million Mom March and I am a baby strapped to her back and I she's wearing a shirt that is the million mom march shirt, and I wear that shirt to bed a lot. She was just this incredible voice for our community. And it's through lived experience and she really valued human life in a very profound way. I mean, my mom was 65 when she was killed, she saw a lot of the world she lived in New York City during the AIDS crisis in the 80s, and she worked in fashion, she lost, her and my dad think they lost about 100 friends and in our little small town in New Jersey in Montclair, which I think is a big town now. There was a mass shooting at our post office were four people died and but five were shot, one survived. So she was very troubled by gun violence in our world. I mean, in 2018, she attended march for our lives in DC. In March, she really succumbed to a very American system, where she was fighting for gun violence for a very long time. And then she became another statistic. So I find that very, very troubling that this can occur in our country, and how it doesn't feel like a coincidence that she can be this activist and then in something that seems so random, she can just be gone one day. So it doesn't really seem fair that I am speaking for her just because she was so eloquent and vibrant in a way that grieving her makes really difficult.



JJ Janflone 31:26

And I know that that must be incredibly difficult especially for you to keep putting yourself out there but I you I cannot articulate again how wonderfully I think you do it and how thankful I am that you're out here doing this work. So thank you so so much for for everything that you've done and continue to do and for coming on today. I think one of the things I'm going to take away from my conversation with Summerleigh for a long time is this aspect of her mom just like showing up. That Wendy showed up for things I actually saw that reflected in a number of articles and stories about Wendy, people remembered her as being the sort of person who like would come to everything if you needed her. She was there if you wanted her there, she was there. And so my goal for this week in honor of Wendy is to just go out there and to show up for the people in my life in a really intentional and loving way. And I hope that all of you do too. And I would love to hear from Red, Blue and Brady listeners, you know, send in to me how you're going to be like Wendy, this week, what are you going to do to show up for somebody in your life? Hey, want to share with the podcast? Listeners can now get in touch with us here at Red, Blue, and Brady via phone or text message! Simply call or text us at (480) 744-3452 with your thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, whatever! Kelly and I are standing by.



Kelly Sampson 32:50

Thanks for listening. As always, Brady's lifesaving work in congress, the courts, and communities across the country is made possible thanks to you. For more information on Brady, or how to get involved in the fight against gun violence, please like and subscribe to the podcast, get in touch with us at bradyunited.org, or on social

@bradybuzz. Be brave, and remember: take action, not sides.