

Episode 193-- Supporting Gun Violence Survivors

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SPEAKERS

JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson, Rachel Joseph



JJ Janflone 00:09

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JJ Janflone 00:37

Everybody, welcome back to Red Blue and Brady. I'm JJ, one of your hosts.



Kelly Sampson 00:41

And I'm Kelly, your other host.



JJ Janflone 00:43

So Kelly, and I just had the incredible honor of sitting down with Rachel Joseph, the founder of a great org that I really hope you know about, Survivors Lead.



Kelly Sampson 00:52

Yeah, and as JJ said, it was an incredible honor. Because as Rachel gets into, for survivors who graciously choose to bring their trauma and their pain to the gun violence prevention movement, it is extremely costly, and they're doing it because they want to keep people safe.

And so it was a huge honor to sit down with Rachel and hear her tell us a little bit about what that's like, how we people who aren't survivors can be better allies. And why it is essential that we bring a trauma informed lens to everything that we do.



JJ Janflone 01:25

Whether you're a survivor, someone who loves the survivors in your life, or just somebody who wants to be a better ally, I think this is really, a big episode to pay close attention to.



Rachel Joseph 01:36

My name is Rachel Joseph and I founded an organization called Survivors Lead back in March of 2018. I have been personally impacted by gun violence. And since being a part of the gun violence prevention movement in 2003, I noticed that a lot of the organizations and policy work that those types of things were being led by people who were not personally impacted. So I thought it was really important to advocate for that as well as providing direct services for victims and survivors. So I founded my own organization like no big deal, right? I'll just do this on a Thursday.



JJ Janflone 02:20

Which has turned into a huge organization that does such great work. And I wonder before, I mean, we're obviously going to talk a lot about Survivors Lead and so much more. But if you're comfortable, I would love if you could share with listeners a little bit about, you know, your aunt Shelley, and you know, not just how she was taken, but like what was her life like? What was she like?



Rachel Joseph 02:42

Yeah, and I love to talk about that, too. She was just such an amazing person. I have met a lot of other survivors since then, and it always seems like it's this family matriarch that is stolen from us. And Shelley definitely was that; family was the most important thing to her. She hosted every single holiday, every family dinner was in her home. She was also a social worker. And she worked with geriatric clients, they called her role a Geriatric Care Manager, which, I guess is much more common now. But she was really a pioneer in that field, like back in the early 90s, and into the 2000s. So that was very important to her and at every family dinner to she'd inevitably have one of her elderly clients at the table. And they would just kind of get absorbed into our family. So she was a very warm, loving, generous person who cared about making the world a better place and cared about making sure that elderly folks could remain in their homes and maintain as much dignity as possible until the very end of their lives.



Kelly Sampson 03:59

Thank you for telling us about her. And it's clear that she did care a lot about people and making the world better. And you definitely have some of those characteristics yourself. So for that, and could you tell us about Survivors Lead?

that, and could you tell us about Survivors Lead?

R

Rachel Joseph 04:12

Yeah, absolutely. So as I mentioned, I've been volunteering and working with different gun violence prevention organizations for years, I think after 15 years, I decided, well, I'm going to start my own thing. But in 2018, I founded Survivors Lead and Survivors Lead is a gun reform and direct service organization. And it's actually the only one in the nation that's 100% led by survivors. So we're really proud of that, our board of directors are all personally impacted by gun violence. Everyone who works with us is personally impacted in some way. And so it's just a wonderful community and a great outlet to be able to support one another and to offer services and referrals to people who really need our assistance.



JJ Janflone 05:05

You know, how do you consider survivor ship?

R

Rachel Joseph 05:08

Yeah, you know? That's a great question. I think like everything else, it's really important to let people kind of self identify if they feel and also to use whatever language they like, whether it's I'm personally impacted by gun violence, or I'm a gun violence survivor, or I'm a gunshot victim. I've heard people say that as well. And so I think it's at Survivors Lead, the way that we operate is that anyone who self identifies as being personally impacted by gun violence can receive direct services, come to our support groups, animal assisted therapy, and anyone is welcome to fight alongside us to work toward gun reform in Minnesota, in Minneapolis as well at the municipal level.

K

Kelly Sampson 05:57

And just for those who might not be familiar, could you quickly explain what direct services are?

R

Rachel Joseph 06:02

Yes, so that can look like a lot of different things at Survivors Lead, it generally looks like trauma informed advocates or social workers assisting to improve communication between police the county attorney's office, if the shooter is known, and grieving families. But our services can look like crisis support from a gun violence survivor in early days, assistance navigating the Office of Justice Programs, paperwork, post death or post injury, there's a lot of bureaucracy, we do a lot of communications and media assistance, particularly with unsolved cases. So you know, that can look like being out with the family flyering neighborhoods, talking to neighbors, keeping the media attention really focused on what happened and keeping that person's name in the media. It can also look like during a high profile trial keeping media at a distance. I know, after Shelley died, we had media calling around the clock nonstop. And it

wasn't because of who Shelley was, or like this terrible loss that happened. It was simply because of where she was shot in a courthouse that it made national news. And so having someone there to really kind of intervene would have been amazing. So it's wonderful to be able to offer that as a service now to keep media the hell away from grieving families in such a difficult time.



JJ Janflone 07:42

You bring up so many important things to sort of unpack, you know, right off the bat, the thing that I keep thinking of when you are thinking of all these various services that different types of survivors need at different stages in their survivorship, I think it really drives home that no one's experience of gun violence is exactly the same.



Rachel Joseph 08:01

That is so true, because individual needs vary so much. As someone impacted by gun violence, I come to the table with an entire background, right? Like my upbringing, my religious beliefs, my community memberships, all kinds of different ideas and values. So survivors aren't a monolith, like, we're still the same person that we were before this terrible thing happened to us while we were just in the process of going about our daily lives. And so I think that the response to different survivors will vary because like you said, we have varying needs. And so it's most important just to make sure that as organizations in this space, we're operating in a trauma informed way. So we're not inflicting any harm ourselves or re-traumatizing somebody.



Kelly Sampson 08:56

And just to put a finer point on it. Why is it so important, you know, for survivors, in particular, to be present and leading within gun violence prevention work, and GVP organizations and even in crafting some of the legislation and the policies that are designed to end it?



Rachel Joseph 09:13

I love that question. Because I like to challenge people back and say, Can you think of one, like civil rights, public health struggle where the people most impacted by that problem, are left out of leadership? because



JJ Janflone 09:34

This is not a visual medium, so they don't see Kelly and I really like no, shaking our hands. It just gets quiet.



Rachel Joseph 09:40

I don't think that's been the norm in this movement. And, you know, we wouldn't have black

lives matter without black leadership. We wouldn't have native lives matter without native leadership. And to me, it just makes sense that we have gun reform led by the people who've been impacted by gun violence.



JJ Janflone 10:00

I just worry that turns into that is the responsibility of the impacted group. Does that make sense?

R

Rachel Joseph 10:05

It totally does. And, and I hear that too. I think that, you know, organizations led by wealthy white billionaires are not inclusive or very equitable. And you know, as you mentioned, we're not a monolith. So survivors can come out of their trauma ready to beat down the doors and Washington and some survivors need time. I'm one of those people who needed time, you know, I really took about eight to 10 years after Shelley's murder, before I really started speaking out and getting angry, and wanting to see things change. But I agree, and if an organization has survivor leadership, I think it's a requirement that that organization, have a trauma informed staff have supports available for survivor leadership that, you know, after we testify, you know, someone needs to be following up and those types of things. It's just, it's not something that should ever be put on anybody or survivors exclusively. And I think that there are ways to weave victims survivor stories into the work that this movement does, without obligating survivors to do all the work. So survivors can really inform the work without having to do all of it.

K

Kelly Sampson 11:38

I love that you put trauma care kind of front and center in the work that you're doing, and understanding of course, that not a monolith. And you're just one person, you know, solely speaking for yourself. What is it like for you, personally, to be involved in this work? I know you said you need to time initially. I mean, you gave yourself that space, and then you got involved. But even so, I know that it must be triggering at times are difficult. So could you talk a little bit about how you personally handle GVP advocacy, while also taking care of yourself?

R

Rachel Joseph 12:15

That's a great question. And I think Survivor's Lead was really born out of me not understanding the best way to do that, too. Because I worked in this movement for such a long time before Survivors Lead. I've testified on behalf of a lot of different organizations, worked with a lot of different organizations and been able to kind of see what their process is. For me, I was very, very traumatized by testifying at the legislature. It's something that I don't like to do, especially in person at the Minnesota Capitol, guns are allowed in the committee hearings. So for a survivor to sit with their back to a room full of armed men. You know, in this situation that I'm thinking of, I was testifying against Stand Your Ground here in Minnesota, which thank god, we are able to black, but the committee chair was armed. So that's really traumatizing. I remember just sitting in those hearings and feeling like I was about to have a panic attack. And

I noticed personally that I was starting to have some very vivid nightmares and things like that, again, after I would testify, a lot of my PTSD and kind of trauma symptoms would start bubbling up. And so it took being able to recognize that retraumatization is happening, that someone else's voice can be amplified. It doesn't always have to be my voice and that it's okay, it doesn't reflect on me or my love for Shelley that you know what I'm not testifying at all this year, somebody else can do it, we can take turns doing it. It's not my turn anymore. I know that much. So I think having a lot of self awareness and also, as you advocate, finding your authentic voice that took me some time to I was given so many messages about how to talk about the worst day of my life. And that's traumatizing. Like, here's this horrible thing that's happened to you and your family and you can't speak about it in the language that you're comfortable using. You have to use our language. And I think that's really damaging to victims and survivors as well. So again, just having a trauma informed staff that understands that, you know, we can't be editing people's worst day, or prescribing how they need to talk about it. It needs to come from an authentic place and then it's going to be the most powerful message it can be as well.



JJ Janflone 15:00

Can you go into that a little bit more if you're comfortable? Like when you say editing the language? Is it just like how to make your story? This is gonna sound really gross, but like how to make your story more palatable to a wider audience or kind of terms? How, how is that sort of like coaching done?



Rachel Joseph 15:16

So, I think that there's a lot of language coaching that happens, which is fine. You know, if we're all talking about policy, we should be using the same kind of terms to help people understand what policy we're talking about. And that all makes sense to me. But I've been to survivor trainings and using air quotes, where a group of survivors, we'd sit at a table, you know, 20 of us have a two or three hour training on kind of how to share your story, like, yeah, there was like a whole method. And then they sat survivors in small groups, like little circles with kitchen timers, and set those timers for three minutes. Okay, go tell me your worst day ever. And I had survivors that actually walked out of that training, and never came back to that organization, they were so upset. And then, you know, I felt just terrible, because this was something that I had invited to Minnesota. So I had to do some work to repair relationships after that, because it was such a, I don't even want to say re traumatizing, just traumatizing period experience being told how to talk about you know, your dead child and in someone else's words and in a certain number of minutes, and make sure to hit background checks. And make sure to give the call to action at the end and then done. I think there's nothing wrong with helping survivors who want that kind of editing before they testify, or do a media interview, those kinds of things. But if we're not letting people speak in their most powerful, authentic voice that is abusive. And I think that the GBP movement should really take a look at at those types of trainings, and what that does to people and who have already experienced so much trauma,



JJ Janflone 17:15

I think to that harkens back to as you said, you know, you're not testifying doesn't mean that

you love Shelley less, or that you're not being fair to her. And I think that that's sort of the same thing, like someone's aunt or mom or kid can't or a partner can't can't be a three minute story. Or just like one testimony. And and I've noticed even from from the podcast that I think a lot of times survivors who aren't given a chance to tell the story in their own words. It's, I've got one shot. Yeah. So let people know about this person that I loved. But I also feel that if I don't get folks to go vote on this bill, that I've somehow failed, and having to deal with both of those, that's a ton of internal. And as you said, no external pressure for somebody to have to carry around.

R

Rachel Joseph 18:06

Yeah, I mean, especially for someone who may just be walking out of like weeks or less away from such a huge trauma. You know, if you think of the person you love most in your entire life being stolen from you. Now, give me an elevator pitch on that person. And don't forget to include a call to action 60 seconds go. It's, it's not okay. It's not what our loved ones deserve. It's not what people who've had to go through horrific injuries, learn to walk again, talk again, you know, my friend, Kate, use your hand again, all over again. It's not what, not what survivors deserve.

K

Kelly Sampson 18:50

So many things that you've said are so powerful, and that what you said about not necessarily punishing yourself for taking risks when you need it. Because it doesn't mean you love the person that you lost any less, I think is so powerful. So I want to reiterate that for anyone listening because I can only imagine how much pressure people might feel. And another thing is you wrote a piece where you said survivors will no longer spend years begging lawmakers in committee for gun reform. Survivors intend to leave those committees. So can you talk a little bit about about that and your vision for that?

R

Rachel Joseph 19:27

I think that was really for me a response to the trauma, the retraumatization and abuse inflicted by the movement as a whole. I'd managed a few campaigns and I felt like my candidates were experiencing less trauma about having to share what you know, and these are survivor candidates I should clarify. I felt like my candidates were experiencing a lot less trauma than I had sharing my story. Pre publicly. And you know, like I had mentioned the survivors tests testifying and in ARM committee hearings, so a piece about having survivors lead those committees is really just a response to the retraumatization. And the abuse kind of inflicted. And also just to let other people in the gun violence prevention movement know that there is a trauma informed way to do this, even though, you know, the, the subject matter that we're talking about, is upsetting for most people. And it's certainly upsetting for those of us who it's happened to, but there's a trauma informed way to do this. And I also felt after so many years, I mean, over a decade, almost two decades of fighting, that the only way we're going to get out of 400 million plus guns in civilian hands is for authentic, powerful survivor voices to move the needle on it. You know, we've got the bipartisan, Safer Communities Act, and that's wonderful. But I think if we had 20, Lucy McBaths in the Senate, you know, would we be waiting days and days, I mean, decades and decades for them to pass meaningful gun

reform? I don't think so. And I don't mean that somebody whose child is violently killed needs to like get up the next morning and run for office by any means not at all. And I think that there are a lot of ways to be a quote, survivor or personally impacted by gun violence. And those people know what helped in in their situation, I certainly know what laws should have been fixed. In my situation with Shelley's murder. And I think it's that lived experience that's brought with survivors to Congress or to the Senate, or whatever public office they're running for. And that personal knowledge to implement the necessary change, to prevent gun violence, but also to know how to respond to it. Because I think the response is something we do, we don't do well in this country.



JJ Janflone 22:20

So to play devil's advocate, or rather, I just want to present, you know, a question that I could hear some people listening to the same, right, which is, you know, any criticism of the movement is delaying progress. Does that make sense that this idea that by trying to be reformulate how compiles prevention organizations work from the inside or how things are formulated that by focusing on that right now, as opposed to maybe just like pushing for legislation, that that's a problem?



Rachel Joseph 22:47

I do. And I think it's, it's a fair criticism. Now, we're a movement that if you look at Sandy Hook is kind of the culmination of the beginning of people starting to really mobilize around Gun Violence Prevention at the federal level, and really focus on the policy rather than you know, because of course, people have been providing care and support and violence interruption in black and brown communities forever and ever. But if you look at 2012 is kind of the beginning, we've been doing this for like 10 years, that's really not that long. Like it's it's kind of a new, I don't know if you want to call it a field, but a new area to advocate in newer. And over that time, the NRA, NSSF, everything's kind of been evolving, and I feel like escalating as well. So I think it's fair that after 10 years that organizations that are involved in gun reform are involved in this movement, kind of take a look and reflect at the work that they've accomplished from the beginning up until now, of course, Brady has been around forever, too. So they probably have more data than anyone. And I'm and I see Brady having more and more and more survivor leadership as well. So I know they've reflected on this. But looking back and just seeing like, Where have we made mistakes with people who've experienced trauma? And how do we try to prevent this from happening again? So we've kind of got the lobbying and the activism and the advocacy piece down, you know, we've got these programs that are doing that, and that's running well. Why don't we look back and see what more we can do for victims and survivors, how can we decrease the harm that we're doing? And after a decade, that feels like a very fair question, and maybe a difficult question for some organizations, but I think it's super important and survivors, being able to continue doing this work kind of rests upon people learning from their mistakes.



Kelly Sampson 24:58

I think, JJ I realized you were asking me the question, but to pick up on something that you just said, in terms of bad things, too, I think when people, you know, organizations like survivors lead, it's not saying only survivors, you know, can support gun violence prevention, it's more

lead is the operative word, and, you know, following and listening to people, and I'm someone who, thankfully, I have not lost a family member to gun violence. And so I think that doesn't mean that you can't advocate but it does mean you need to listen and protect and care for people. And it's kind of the same. I love what you asked earlier about what other social movements have not included people who are closest to the pain. And you're right, like, obviously, there's so many social movements, like the civil rights movement, where it was led by black people, but there were allies who were not black who care, but they were following the lead of those closest and I think, you know, what I hear you saying isn't no one else can, you know, ever be involved, but more like, you know, take your cues from listen to be willing to adjust to the needs of people? And, you know, almost, I think also interrogate? If you do feel like, Why have to be in the lead? Why is that? You know, are you just profiting from it? And so anyway, I think that question port and bad faith seems to be centering someone's need, maybe for like attention or something, and not necessarily like the cause, as someone who's outside.

R

Rachel Joseph 26:32

Yeah, I'm absolutely not saying that survivors need to do all this. And just survivors of that would really suck. And I would feel very lonely. And I know a lot of survivors, and I'm friends with and have worked with a lot of survivors. But I certainly wouldn't want to say, hey, this work is all on us now. So yeah, I mean, absolutely. Allies and people being in this movement, because, you know, we're sharing the worst day of our lives. And it's already happened to us. And I think that's really motivating for people who are unimpacted, you know, who've seen a friend or a neighbor or someone else go through this. And I think a lot of people don't necessarily view themselves as personally impacted if they have a loved one who died of suicide by gun to which in Minnesota is way higher than the rest of the country. It's like 80 to 85% of all of our gun deaths here in the state one nationally, it's like 20 points less than that, still very high. But yeah, so I think there's room for a lot of people in this work and just reflecting again, on where we've been, what we've done, what worked and what didn't, I'm just kind of asking people to be more intentional and mindful of the ways that they ask survivors to participate, I think, wanting to uplift those voices first. Makes sense. But also giving someone the option is really important, right? Like, your story fits this perfectly, and your loved one and this and that and putting them on like a national stage over and over again, can be so harmful. So yeah, I think just making sure that we're uplifting the voices and not like requiring participation of people and the people that choose to participate with us, making sure that they have like the follow up support and resources that they're not experiencing additional trauma because of their advocacy. Because I've been through that it doesn't feel great.



JJ Janflone 28:51

I mean, I think that's like the fine line that we have to try to walk here even right, like, how do you spread information using people's personal stories, like particularly in a podcast format, where like, True Crime does this terribly, as a medium, right? But how do I share people's stories because that's what people respond to. But also, I think it can be very healing and empowering, but how do you do that in a way that's not hurting? At the minimum?

R

Rachel Joseph 29:15

I think just even onboarding new volunteers or staff like letting people who are personally

I think just even onboarding new volunteers or staff like telling people who are personally impacted know that that's something that may happen. Survivors, at least, you know, speaking for myself, most of the survivors that I've worked with, as well just really appreciate knowing what's next because a lot of our trauma is rooted in just the suddenness and of the trauma and no closer you know, not getting to say goodbye. Oftentimes, I know that I didn't, and I'm just applying it for everyone you know, kind of figuring out what best practices look like for you and your organization and then apply laying it, you know, across the board to every survivor that you work with I, you know, that's what we try to do. And I would love to see other organizations doing the same to definitely.

K

Kelly Sampson 30:12

You mentioned, one of the things that you would love to see in this space is for organizations like Brady and other ones to be trauma informed and really caring in the way that we engage survivors. And I'm wondering, what else would you like to see for gun violence prevention going forward? Whether it's related to survivors, whether it's related to legislation or anything really,

R

Rachel Joseph 30:37

you know, in general, I would say what I'd like to see going forward is obviously, we want to see other gun violence prevention bills, gun reform legislation pass, and be implemented. But for me, personally, I think what I want to work on the most like, going into 2023. And beyond and being in Minneapolis and being on the street that I grew up on in Minneapolis living here, again, three blocks from where George Floyd was heinously murdered at 38th in Chicago, is rethinking ways to work without police and gun violence prevention. I think a lot of organizations have felt like they needed police voice and police support, which I think is great to have, as long as they exist, but I don't think it's necessary. And I've been talking with other individuals, and, you know, black and brown led social justice organizations, about rethinking our approach to gun violence prevention, because as we know, police really aren't preventing gun violence. So what are some other roles social workers, advocates, people who work with children to prevent childhood adversity? What are some other ways of gun violence prevention that don't include police? And if we amp those up, will our need for police go down? And how much do we really need them to begin with? I know there are people who are going to think I'm crazy for saying that. But there's a reason that I believe that,



JJ Janflone 32:26

Rachel, I mean, thank you for so much. So many things. But I think that that's an excellent note to end on. Right, this idea of pushing for a more equitable future for everybody.

K

Kelly Sampson 32:40

Wow, Rachel is so wise. And there were so many things that she said that have changed the way that I think about the work that that I do every day, I know that.



... 33:53



JJ Jantlone 32:52

For sure, exactly. Kelly, what I keep coming back to is, I can intellectually, you know, and sort of, to a certain degree, emotionally understand that survivors put take on such a burden in this movement. But as I'm not a survivor, you know, I don't actually know what it's like to go through. So I think, as she pointed out, having survivors be present at every single step of of this movement, and making sure that we're supporting the folks who have been through this is huge.



Kelly Sampson 33:22

Yeah. And a big thing for me, in addition of what you said, is kind of honing in on what Rachel was saying to fellow survivors. I just want to emphasize it one more time when she was saying, if if you need to take a break, if you need to take rest, if you need to go. That doesn't mean that you love your loved one any less or that you're not honoring them, because it is so important to take care of yourself.



JJ Janflone 33:50

Again, not a physical medium so people can't see it. But I am clapping at you.



Kelly Sampson 33:54

Hello, clap. It's the transitive property of clapping because you're clapping for Rachel.



JJ Janflone 34:01

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 34:16

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