

199-this-only-happens-to-other-people-until-it-happens-to-yo...

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SPEAKERS

Dennis Harris, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson



JJ Janflone 00:09

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JJ Janflone 00:39

Hey, everybody, welcome back to another episode of Red, Blue, and Brady. I'm one of your hosts, JJ.



Kelly Sampson 00:44

And I'm your other host, Kelly.



JJ Janflone 00:45


And we're here today to share with you a really, really important story with a phenomenal guest. Dennis Harris is a lot of things. He's a law enforcement veteran over 40 years. He's a gun owner. He is a business owner who helped create a really innovative gun lock, but he's also a grieving father.



Kelly Sampson 01:03

Yeah, and it's those last two things, the business and Dennis's children that are the crux of the next two episodes that you're hear because his business T-Lock honors his daughter to TaLeah

who died by firearm suicide when she was able to access a gun that was not locked. And so it's a really wrenching story. It's a really difficult story. But Dennis and his family took the grief that they carry with them around the way that unsafe storage led to TaLeah's death and have channeled that grief into creating this lock, which will hopefully keep other families from experiencing the same grief that they have.

 Dennis Harris 01:49

My name is Dennis Harris. I am actually living in Southern Utah right now. I want to say I graduated from law enforcement. I spent 41-and-a-half years in public safety, mostly with the sheriff's office. I also worked in quite a few different positions there. I actually worked, I started off in corrections, I worked in patrol, I actually was on the SWAT team. I was over the gang project in our area. I, boy, I did anyway, so I worked in quite a few different positions. I worked, I was a field director for the Major Crimes Task Force, which is a narcotics unit, a federal state and local police officers. And so you know, I've had a little bit of experience, and I thought you know what, it's finally time to retire.




JJ Janflone 02:43

Well, and beyond that too, sort of professionally, you were you were also a dad. You still are a dad.

 Dennis Harris 02:49

Yeah, yeah, I am a very proud father. I have three girls and one boy. And one of my daughters, I still say, I have three daughters, which I do. One has since passed away.

 Kelly Sampson 03:02

Yeah, and this is the part of the podcast where I know JJ and I always say, as good as it is to know wonderful people like you, the circumstances that we're meeting in are because of that loss and so I'm wondering as much as you'd like to, if you could tell us a little bit about your daughter TaLeah.

 Dennis Harris 03:20

Absolutely. I would love to, you know, something that I've learned through counseling, and through disastrous situation in my family, is that, the more that I talked about it, the more that I heal. I know, a lot of people, a bad situation happens happens with their family, and a lot of times people just kind of keep it in, and they don't talk about it. But I have found through counseling, talking, the more I talk about it, the faster that I heal. And it's not that I still don't have a big hole in my heart. I always will. You know, I just, she was such a loving girl, she was a prankster. She was just like any other teenager, she she was someone you couldn't help but love a lot. And you know, I know one day I'll be able to hold her again in my arms. I know that day will come sooner or later. And I cherish the memories that I have with her. You know, going

camping, going for rides, just sitting home playing games. And you know, I want to especially thank my family. Well, thank my wife. I want to thank all my kids. I want to thank them, you know, together. We we did it. We love you TaLeah. And, you know, we hope that you're proud of what we're doing, which I'm sure that you are.

D

Dennis Harris 04:49

But I'm going to go back to when I was working in narcotics. And usually I would work 12,13,14,15 hours a day and I would get home very, very late in the morning, a lot of times like 2,3,4 o'clock and, and then I was off to work, you know, again, by 11 o'clock, you know. And so I, on Thursday, April the 30th, 1998, I remember that day very vividly, I had actually come home from working narcotics early that morning, I'm gonna say about 2:30, somewhere around there. And I remember coming into the house, and I thought, you know what, I'm going to take my gun out, my duty gun, and I'm just going to open up the closet. And I got on my, I say my tippy toes, I got as high as I could, so I could put the gun in the very back of the closet on the very top shelf, out of sight, out of mind. And I actually decided, well, I got up that morning and my intentions were to go ahead and grab it and lock it up. And I forgot to. And so I went outside, and I thought I'd go ahead and do some rototilling in my garden. And so I got on the tractor and started doing some rototilling. And I think maybe after about a half hour of rototilling, my daughter's boyfriend from school, from high school, come running around the house and ran up to me where the tractor was and said, "Hey, Dennis, TaLeah just called me a short time ago and said she couldn't breathe." And I looked at him and I said, "What are you talking about?" And I'm really trying to piece things together because it didn't make any sense. And so I jumped off the tractor, and I ran upstairs into her bedroom, and she wasn't there. And so the next thing I did is I thought, well, she's here somewhere. So I ran into our bedroom into our bedroom. And she was laying on the floor. And, of course, I was trying to assess the situation as fast as I could. And by the color of her face, I knew at that point that she had passed away and there was nothing that I was going to do to bring her back. I was just trying to figure out what was, what was wrong. Because I couldn't see anything, outwardly, right off the bat to indicate that there was something wrong. And so as I'm assessing situation, I pulled her shirt up a little bit. And I can see what was just a red, some blood, just very little right where she had shot herself. And the reason I knew she had shot herself is I took my small finger and I just kind of lightly pushed it there to figure out what had happened. And so I knew that she was gone.

D

Dennis Harris 08:11

And I remember getting my cell phone and calling 911 and ran out to the driveway so the police and fire department could see where I was at. And there's a lot of things that just kind of went black in my life at that time that I couldn't remember, just really foggy. But I do remember quite a few police cars, both from the city police and the sheriff's office. And the fire department was just up and down the street on both sides. And, you know, I did one of the most difficult things I've ever had to deal with or live with in my life. I contacted my wife, Tamara, and she was out at the gym area working out. And I said, Tamra, you need to come home. And she goes, "why?" I said Tamara, "just don't ask me why you need to come home." And she started crying on the phone. I think she felt the sense of urgency, sort of, to speak of, she understood that I was dealing with a major problem, but I didn't want to tell her over the phone. So she came home. And needless to say, extremely hard time. The police department

went and picked up one of my other daughters and my son from school and brought them home. And I explained to each one of them individually what had happened. I remember we were staying out of the house and my wife had a beauty salon in the garage. And so we were all meeting in there. And my youngest daughter who hadn't started school yet, was just getting ready to, it was a situation where I felt like we had all imploded. And I grabbed my little girl, and I put her on my lap. And I told her, I said, TaLeah, your sister is with heavenly father right now. I explained it to her the best way I could. And needless to say, you know it, it devastated our family, it devastated us so much that my oldest daughter, but it's like she hit the ground at mach two, and we started having problems with her. So we put her into a program, because I wasn't going to lose another child. And I think that program helped her out, gave her a lot of tools. And my son, about a year later, I thought he was okay. And then about a year later, he hit the ground mach two. And we put him into a program. And needless to say, we spent a lot of money, I'd spend it all over again. But I had to do everything I could to save my kids. There is not a day that doesn't go by that I blame myself, every single day of my life, I blame myself, it's been extremely hard. But you know, I need to go forward and I need to, I need to do something. And I think my daughter expects me to do something. And so I want to, I want to be that Dad, I want to be that father. And I want to be an example of what not to do and what to do. And so, you know, I looked at, I know they talk about suicide today. My daughter was TaLeah, she was struggling with depression and had an anxiety. You know, a lot of the things that normal teenagers go through. But it seemed like she was experiencing it pretty hard. And, you know, we just kind of, were getting help, doing everything we could, and never dreamed in a million years that this would happen to our family, because this always happens to other families. It doesn't happen to mine. But until it did, you know, I'm trying to move forward one step at a time, and trying to make other people's lives a lot better, also.



JJ Janflone 12:33

Thank you so much for sharing with us. There's no, it's just, it's awful. So thank you for sharing with us. But I'm just, it doesn't do anything, I'm just so sorry. Can I ask then what was returning to work like for you? Because you continue to be, you know, in law enforcement for many years carrying a firearm and I can't imagine that that was easy.



Dennis Harris 12:57

It was extremely difficult. I took two weeks off after my daughter passed away. And my first day back to work, I was called to a suicide up on the side of the mountain. That was hard. I, there was a gentleman that committed suicide. and I remember it started to rain real lightly. And I told the other deputies, let's grab a piece of plastic and put it over this man. Protect him from the elements. And one of the guys kind of said, well, he's dead. I said you don't understand, this is someone's father, this is someone's uncle. This is a loved one. And so I left the mountain that day. And I went straight to my daughter's resting place. And all I did is cry for the rest of the evening. But one thing that I did, when I was working at the sheriff's office I, I always volunteered to go ahead and make notices to the families of those who experienced suicide. I always tried to be one of the first ones to arrive at that family's house so I could talk to them. Because I felt like I could relate to them and know some of the things that they're going through, especially deep inside their heart. You know, those were rough times. And it's still hard times. But you know, it was either that I stayed home and the more I thought about it, the worse my day became. And same way with my wife, the more that she thought about it. And so

we knew that in order to be healthy, we had to keep our minds active and our kids minds active and so my wife went to beauty school, and I think that helped her out tremendously. I went back to work just to kind of keep my mind busy. And even though it was difficult every day, I went to work for quite a while, it was like dragging one foot in front of the other one. And then as I started to get some counseling, I remember a therapist telling me that if you will talk about this, which is hard, and I didn't want to talk to anyone about it to begin with, but the more you talk about it, he said, the faster you will heal, it was true, the more I talked about it, and then even though it didn't feel real comfortable, that was hard to do, to be honest with you, because I felt like I was bringing these emotions from the very bottom of the ocean back up to the top again, and but it was important that I got out there and started. And yeah, it was hard as can be going back to work. I just, you know, I feel that I'm doing something positive. With this experience, something positive, that maybe I can help wake up other people in the United States, which they need to be woke up. They cannot take the chance of ever going through something like this. And so that is the reason that I created T-Lock, which is named after my daughter, TaLeah.



JJ Janflone 16:26

Like thank you for being so honest, sort of, with your experience.



Dennis Harris 16:31

It's very hard. As you can tell, I'm, I'm 100%, an advocate that if you have a gun, you have to have a lock. And you know, I love my daughter. She knows I love her. And she knows that her and I are going to have a good talking to when we see each other again. But she knows I love her. And I know she is very supportive, in what I'm trying to accomplish. If I could just share something else with you. I'm going to read you something that I put on my website. And I was sitting down trying to figure out what could I put on my website that would resonate with those that actually see this. And, you know, I just couldn't come up with anything. And then all of a sudden, I know this is going to seem different. But my daughter, I felt her next to me. And I wrote this in five minutes. And this is how it went. Something I blame myself for each day I am alive. This only happens to other families until it happened to mine. My daughter had a long battle with anxiety and depression. She died by suicide using my gun that I thought she would never find. Over the years, my family fell into depression and misery, a downward spiral that we wondered would ever stop. But from the ashes rose, my two beautiful daughters, son and wife that never blamed me. This project was born to prevent any family from going through the hell from where we came. We believe that a family can have strength and peace through security.



Dennis Harris 18:27

And so it was really important for me to read that to you because my daughter was with me when I wrote it. This, I've looked into suicide a lot. Matter of fact, I started to write a book, it's called "suicide, the atomic bomb." And you know, when the atomic bomb was dropped in Japan, you know, there were a lot of people that were killed instantly. But if you look at it, and if you were to look at an atomic bomb from an aerial view, you can see concentric circles where they start, they get bigger and bigger from the atomic bomb. And even though it never killed

everybody at once, some people died a year later, two years later, and years later. Just like my family, it affected my oldest daughter right off the bat, my son, it affected him a year later. And the thing is, I would dare say that every teenager, not only teenagers, adults, they go through depression. And I have said this, that I believe almost every human being has contemplated suicide at one stage or another, some may have thought about it and that's that's all it was. Others had taken it to another step and others to a whole other step, you know to where they ended up taking their life. And so you know, oh, I love the Second Amendment. You know, I'm glad that you know, citizens, you know, we can own weapons. But you know, owning weapons also means that we have an obligation, and that is to protect them. And in, if we protect them, then we strengthen the Second Amendment. We can't allow other people to get guns, because we all know that they're going to break into your house, they're going to break into your car. And so it's very important that we always keep our guns locked up.



JJ Janflone 20:41

I think what's brilliant there is that you mentioned that you never thought that this would happen to you or to your family. And I wonder what you would say to folks who believe that as well, right, that this is never going to happen to them? For whatever reason, whether they, because they taught their kid about gun safety, or they think that they hide it well? Or, you know, they typically put it in a safe, what, what would you say to them?



Dennis Harris 21:10

Well, you know, what, I guess I would be talking to myself, because I never thought it was going to happen to my family. And if that person was to say that, I would absolutely stand in front of them, and guarantee them, that at some point in time, that child that you taught how to use a firearm, very safely and very effectively, at some point in time, that child is going to have some depression in his or her life. And when you get depression, you know, I'm gonna, I'm gonna jump into that a little bit. When you get into depression, it's like, tunnel vision. It's like, the only thing that you can see is what is affecting you at that time. And all the things that your parents taught you about gun safety goes out the window, because all you can think of is that, I'm depressed, I don't know that I want to live anymore, and I don't know how to cope with what I'm currently dealing with. Now, I can give you 100 examples of families that have that have thought the same thing that I thought. And so there is no margin. There is no leeway. And I'm glad you brought that up because there are a lot of families that say, well, my kids all know where my guns are. Well, you know what, let me tell you something, that's great. But at the same time, you better protect your guns because your kids are still growing up.



Kelly Sampson 22:49

I mean, to the points that you've been making about responsibility around firearms and how it's sort of, it's more than just the firearm itself. It's everything you need. The tagline that you put in place for the T-Lock, is that it's for "officers, parents and responsible gun owners." Could you talk a little bit about why it was important to you to, to characterize the lock that way and why you chose those individuals to specifically market to?



D**Dennis Harris 23:18**

Absolutely, you know, I started checking, you know, just some statistics. And, you know, we have 326.7 million people in the United States, that I mean, that's, that's quite a few people, and approximately 40% of them have guns in their home. But in the United States, we have 434 million guns in the United States. And I've always said that we probably have the largest standing army in the world, you know, as being the citizens of the United States. But the reason I said to parents, is because it affected me, and it devastated not only me, but all the people that I worked with, and all the all my family, so you know, parents, responsible citizens and police officers. I know that if if we just start with that premise, and trying to make the Second Amendment strong, that we have to do our part. And we have to be an example. There's no, there's no given give and take on this. There's no, there's no room for leeway. This has to be if you purchase a gun, you have to purchase a lock. And in some states, they require it. And I highly encourage every state in the United States to make that requirement. If you're going to buy a gun, you have to have a lock and if you already have a gun, you have to have a lock. And so that's the reason is because if we all do it, then I think we're going to have less shootings, we're going to have less suicides. You know, 51% of the suicides in America involve a firearm. 89% of all accidental shootings are in a home or car, and 80% of youths, attempting suicides, use a family firearm. That's, that's huge. And, you know, we just live in a society today where we can't allow anybody to have a gun without having a lock.

K**Kelly Sampson 25:37**

Thank you for sharing that. And you guys, you and your daughter are going to be saving a lot of people's lives. I know it, because as you mentioned, so many families experienced this in the U.S. And so this is going to help people. I'm sure it's part of sharing about the T-Lock, you have to kind of continue to bring this up. And I know you said it's part of your healing, but I can also assume that it's very difficult too.

D**Dennis Harris 26:08**

Well, thank you, Kelly, I really appreciate that. It means a lot that you would say that. We are dedicated to the safety of every child, to every adult. And we're 100% committed to it.

**JJ Janflone 26:20**

Well, in our next episode, we're getting into the nitty gritty of T-Lock, of how it developed, and what it does, and what products like it do to help try to keep people safe. So stick around for that for sure. But I just, Dennis, thank you, thank you for sharing TaLeah with us. And thank you for all the work that you and your family do.

**JJ Janflone 26:42**

Kelly, this is, some of these episodes, always, some of these interviews always, I think hit me a little harder than others. But the thing I'm taking away from this one is that, it's so good and like earnestly kind of the the folks that we have on and like Dennis especially to share their experiences with us with the aim of helping to prevent that loss for somebody else, even

though it's obviously really hard for them. So I just I am I am constantly floored at the survivors in this space and the work and the burden they take on and I am so mad for them that they have to do that.

K

Kelly Sampson 27:23

Yeah, I think it's pretty, It's a specific type of altruism, in any case, but I think especially in a case like this where, on one hand, you know, Dennis sort of very vulnerably shared the ways that he feels at blame, and yet he doesn't, he could easily just never talk about this, or want to hide it. But instead he wants to share with other people. And that's just a really courageous thing to do. That kind of leads to one of my big, big takeaways, which is the fact that we are humans, humans make mistakes, we get tired, our physical health fails. It's sort of written in the contract of being a human being that you are frail, and that you will fail and make mistakes sometimes. And so with that, that means that if you're a human who has a firearm, it doesn't matter if you think it can't happen to you. It can. And I think it's so brave of Dennis to use his his platform to how that point, and to do that in honor of TaLeah, his daughter, who, as you said is not a statistic. So, those are kind of my takeaways and things that I'll be thinking a lot about.



JJ Janflone 28:42

What to share with 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.

K

Kelly Sampson 28:53

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