**Episode 2 - Unrecognizable**

Welcome. This is Jen Lee, the host of I Need Blue. I came face to face with danger, now I spend my time giving back to survivors and the heroes that saved us. Why a podcast? I miss talking. I miss meeting and connecting with people. The means in which to do this have changed, especially with COVID. I decided it was time to use a different platform to share my victim turned survivor story. When you come face to face with danger, and you will hear my story in a minute., you learn not to take for granted your safety, and especially those who keep us safe. Now more than ever, it is important to use the facts from real life situations to reinforce the valuable need of our law enforcement. They keep our communities safe.

Please know I Need Blue does feature graphic themes, including but not limited to violence, abuse, murder, and may not be suitable to all listeners. Some episodes also contain themes which may be triggering. Please take care of yourself and don't hesitate to ask for professional help.

Today is a continuation of episode 1, the voice behind me. It is my story and if you wish to experience the 20 minutes of my life which motivated me to start the I Need Blue podcast, visit www.ineedblue.net, or the I Need Blue podcast can be found on all of your favorite platforms, such as Spotify, Pandora, and apple.

 Without giving away any of the scary details, I left off with the police rescuing the 9 of us after being abducted by the robber. In this episode, I will talk about the journey I took in first being a victim and then working hard to become a survivor. I have included a special guest today. Alan P. Smith. He is a clinical social worker who through mental health therapy helps trauma victims. For 30 years he has dedicated his time to helping people such as myself.

Let's get started. It was my turn to provide the police officers with my identification. I walked over to my desk. I knew my red wallet had been there. I shuffled through papers and looked on the floor. It had to be there. It had my credit cards my ID with my current address. I stopped and had to accept the fact my wallet wasn't there. Now I had no phone and no wallet.

As I walked out onto the sales floor, the police officers informed me when they entered the store, they walked into a scene of customers shopping. There were not any employees present. The register drawers were open, empty of bills, and only coins existed. The police ushered the customers out and continued their search for us.

 I walked out onto the sales floor. I could see other customers cooperating with law enforcement. I noticed the blue lights, the yellow "do not cross" tape outside of our front doors. It was a scene from a movie, but for me this was real. I remember pulling out the white binder with the contact number for our stores and other managers. I was thankful for the list because I didn't have my cell phone to get the numbers. I called my district manager and gave her details that I remembered in the moment. She offered to come stay the night with me. I thanked her, but knew I could stay with a friend. I called my parents. I could feel the adrenaline start to subside. I was fighting anxiety and the physical need for my body to shake.

The officers went outside to search the trash from my phone and wallet. Nothing. It was during this time that I remembered I had the app on my phone. Where's my droid? I told the officers if they still had my phone, meaning the robbers, they could track it. And they did.

I stayed with a friend that night. I tried to drink until I was numb and the shaking would stop. Not a whole lot of luck with that. The next morning, the realizations of what happened are stronger than ever.

My friend dropped me back off at the store. I had on sunglasses; between the crying, stress, and being unable to sleep, my eyes were unrecognizable. Especially to me. I wanted to hide the weakness I felt in myself. They say your eyes are the window to your soul. I didn't want anyone to see what I was feeling.

Everything was pretty much a blur. I met the police officers, we walked the scene trying to remember everything I possibly could. They wanted me to think about people I had seen in the store earlier that day; had any resembled the robber or the clothes he was wearing. It was interesting, because I actually remembered more conversations I had with people, things they were wearing. I remembered more than I would have ever imagined I was capable. Our mind actually takes in a lot of information, and until we actually have to recall it, we have no idea.

About 4:30 a.m. Monday I had gotten a phone call from the detective. He called to say after they pinged my phone, because he still had it, they were able to find him and arrest him. They also ended up catching the driver. What a relief to know they had gotten him and he was off the streets.

I want to share with you what it's like to feel as though your sense of safety has not just been shaken, but literally shattered. Imagine what it feels like to look on the ground and see shattered pieces of glass. All these little pieces just laying there. It's overwhelming because you can only put it back together again, one piece at a time. And you hope the glue you pick is going to be the mold, the foundation to keep it in place.

I took different measures living at home than I would have ever thought I would have too. I had two cats who fortunately did not like strangers. I knew if I got home and I opened the door and they weren't there someone was in the house. If they didn't come to the door I would not walk in. The other thing I did is I took a sliver of paper and I put it in the door jamb at the bottom of the door so nobody would notice it was there. If that piece of paper had fallen to the ground, then I also knew someone had entered my home. I had a front door and a side door. So each door had that little slither of paper.

I also, and I never figured out why, I would not go in my bedroom. It was about three weeks before I felt comfortable and I could sleep in there. I did make the decision to have someone stay with me. Just to have someone else in the house gave me peace of mind. I was thankful.

In regards to work, I was put on a 10 day leave.

The first week I spend almost every day with the police officers helping them. It was emotionally hard. I remember I cried a lot as they highly encouraged that I get help. They offered to find help for me if I needed it, but I wasn't quite ready. I think helping them, being in their presence, made me feel safe. But also, my work, my job, was my sense of purpose. It's where I felt I helped people, even if it was just to put a smile on a woman's face while she tried on a new dress. I lost that purpose. I found a new one in helping the police catch the bad guy.

I remember them coming to my house with a picture lineup. I can still picture what that paper with several photos looks like. When you identify the suspect, you turn over this piece of paper and you write your name on the back of it. That was interesting. Obviously, I've never been in this situation before so the processes are different. In the meantime, I had gotten a new phone, same Droid chocolate, canceled my credit cards, started to get a new license.

 I needed family. I needed to see my boys. They had lots of guns. I have no issue with guns. I grew up in a family that hunted. We did hunter safety. I was around guns all the time. I told my boys this time I said, "I need you to leave your guns at home." Even though I knew they were fake, I couldn't handle seeing them. I remember we went up north to see my brother and my sister, sister in law. Normally we have a joyous time playing cards, but this time around I remember I just sat on the couch and I played Angry Birds on my phone. I was numb. It was like I needed them there, but I didn't want to talk. I remember my sister in law behind me whispering, "She's just sitting there. I don't know what to do."

 They caught the driver. I had never seen him. Catching him is what started the whole ball rolling on me having to go to court.

I'd never seen the driver, I didn't really know why I needed to go to court. But I did. I walked in and didn't expect to see he had family or friends in the courtroom. It was my first time being in front of a jury, which is not like you see on TV. It's very scary. I told my story. I cried. I guess they must have needed my story to see, as an accomplice, the emotional impact and trauma his decision in this robbery has caused.

 Because he had family or friends there, I felt fear again of, are they going to follow me? Do they want to hurt me? They know what I look like. They know what I drive. Are they going to follow me home.? This is the types of things that go through your head.

I was approaching the end of my 10 day leave. I went to see a therapist, which was a very good decision.

After a few visits with him, I said it was time for me to go back to work. He said, " I don't recommend you go back. You are not ready." He told me this a few times, but I'm kind of stubborn. I'm also the type of individual where I don't go half way down a road and turn around and spend the rest of my life wondering "what if." I have to go to the stop sign and know if I can do it or not. Not returning to work at that time meant I only went halfway down the road. I wasn't going to do that.

My first day back I walked in, and I remember standing outside the door to the room where we were abducted and left. It was like flashbulbs going off. I could feel all the triggers, see all the things I'd remembered. I could not go in that room, and I never did.

We had a conference call. My district manager asked me how I was doing. I said," I don't think I'm okay." Her response was, "this is the busiest time of year for us." She needed to know if I was going to be able to work. She needed to know soon because she had to replace me. From a business point of view, I absolutely understood. I struggled because I was an accomplished manager, respected. They knew I generated results. So to come to the realization that maybe I can't do this anymore, made me feel weak and inadequate.

In my mind, I was dealing with the thougt of, I helped potentially save people and this is what I get in return.?" But at the end of the day, I understood business is business. The conference call ended and I needed to go back out on to the sales floor. I pushed open the door, my assistant manager was standing there talking with a man. I grabbed my assistant managers wrist, and I about burst into tears. She said "What is wrong with you? Are you okay? " I said, "this is what happens to me!" I could feel the anxiety and my body want to shake. The man standing there apologized and said, "I didn't mean to scare you." He was our security guard but it didn't matter because it triggered a memory of the robber. I looked at him and I said, "it's not you. It's me." If ever that relationship line was ever true, it was in that moment. I was embarrassed, humiliated. I'm not afraid of men. It triggered a fearful feeling in me.

 I knew I wasn't okay. Forget the fact I couldn't go in my room. I couldn't look at guns. This reaction was the final straw. I came to the realization that I can't do this job. I can't be here, and I need to get better. I called my district manager and I told her what happened. I said I can't do this job anymore. I gathered my belongings, apologized to the security guard one more time and left the store. I continued my sessions in therapy and filed for workman's comp.

I had several subpoenas where I needed to go to court. There were moments I wished I had some support from family or friends, but on the flip side, there were times that I didn't. I didn't want my family or friends see me cry or be weak. It was an internal conflict of: I really need someone here and I really don't want someone here.

I had to find a new job. So within the six weeks, I was able to find one in the same field about 45 minutes away from where I was. When I got hired, I let them know there are times I will be called to court at the last minute. It was just part of my life at that time. They said "no problem." But interestingly enough, when I did have to call them to say, I can't make it into work, I seemed to become an inconvenience. Even though it was, I'm going to say a couple of months, maybe even six months after the fact, I still was being plagued by the repercussions of the robbery, and my responsibilities that went along with it.

The robber ended up being charged with multiple felonies, without me having to go to a jury trial for him. 2 years after the incident, I get a call. At this point I had moved a few hours north, new job, and closer to family. In December, I will never forget where I was, what job I had, I was in the office, a lady calls. She says, "I'm gonna need you to come to federal court to testify." I told her, "I can't, I can't do it. You don't understand." She's says, "I'm sorry, but you're gonna have to be here."

 I hung up the phone and cried. All of the emotions, the fear, everything just came flooding back. I feel like everything I worked so hard to deal with, now somebody just pulled the band aid off. The glue which I had put on to keep all of the pieces together ,which made me feel safe, just melted. It was no longer good enough to hold it together.

The following month, I was scheduled to testify in federal court. Regular court was bad enough, but when you hear the word federal court, you automatically have this additional awareness of the seriousness. I drove the hour and a half to get to the courthouse.

We were ushered into a room. It was the first time all of us victims were together. And I will say over the past couple of years, I did wonder how they were doing. I knew how I was doing. But I really wanted to know how they were doing, were they okay. As much as I didn't want to be there that day, I was thankful I was able to see these people because I always wanted to say thank you. I wanted to thank them for trusting me enough to follow my lead. You don't know how you're going to respond to situations like this. One of them could have wanted to be a hero, could have reacted radically and startled him. And then the outcome could have been very different. So to have the opportunity to say thank you, yes, I would go to federal court again for that opportunity.

I remember we were all in this room, and a lady comes in. She wants our information because they want to reimburse us for our mileage and gas. It was my turn to get my information and I looked at the lady and I said, "I don't want your money. I just want you to leave me alone." The tears started to come. She said " I'm really sorry. We want to help you this way." And I said, "I don't want it. I just want you to leave me alone."

It was my turn to testify in front of the jury. This courtroom was different in that it was bigger, more people, darker wood. I remember walking down the aisle and getting into the booth. The booth was to the left of the judge, and the robber was in front of me. This time he had on glasses.

I was asked a series of questions. The questions started to go in the direction of questioning my character. Immediately that tactic was shut down, it was not going to be allowed. As I told my story, just like the last time I was in front of a jury, I cried. They gave me some Kleenex. And I remember, it was like a ball in my hand, wet, deteriorating. They brought me some water.

I don't remember why, but I had to come back again, the next day. Like, if one day wasn't bad enough, I had to come back. One more day of testifying in front of the jury. At the end of the second day, the judge asked me if I had any questions. I looked at him, and I said, "Do I have to come back anymore?" And he said, "No, ma'am, you don't." I looked at him. And I said, "Thank you." I have not had to go back.

I had moments. And I'm sure other victims have had these moments as well, where I wished I hadn't seen the assailant. I wished I hadn't seen the robber because I had to go to court over and over, I had to see him. I told myself, "Jen, you've been put in this position for a reason, and you are stronger than you think. And if you don't do this, then who else is going to get hurt? He had a gun in hostages, you were abducted. Next time, it might not be so fortunate for others" So I had to reason with myself and say everything. Everything happens for a reason. And I'm thankful to God for giving me the strength to do what I had to do.

Thank you for listening to my story. I want to bring Alan P. Smith, into the conversation. He is a clinical therapist and has helped individuals such as myself for over 30 years. Keep in mind that everybody's experience is different. Just because this is how I reacted doesn't mean it's how you would react. Alan, thank you again for being here today. And for sharing your story.

Alan Smith

The healing process can be very difficult. And in your case, Jen, having to testify, going to the police numerous times during the lineup, all that stuff can be very, very difficult and definitely a unique challenge to victims of violent crime. I think it's important to illuminate many of the different challenges victims go through. I need to say at this point, though, this is for informational purposes only. Nothing really takes the place of a therapists office. I highly encourage any victim out there that is contemplating therapy to go into therapy, it really is a beneficial thing, and definitely something I've devoted 30 plus years doing.

Jen Lee

I absolutely agree and taking the first step to therapy can seem really hard. I don't think therapy is meant to be easy. It's meant to help you look inside and really understand what you're feeling. Learn what your triggers are, and then learn how to deal with them in a healthy way.

Alan Smith

First question I get a lot is ,why therapy? It doesn't change anything? You can talk all day long about what happened to you but it doesn't change the fact it happened. I share with a client who is hesitant, how helpful it is simply telling your story or finding any way to tell it wether it's to a therapist, writing in a journal... if you feel comfortable talking with someone, or to a close friend, whoever that may be, it definitely helps integrate your brain and help the beginning of the healing process. Try to normalize the experience.

It's very easy to feel like you're losing control. That's normal for a victim. It's not normal prior to the traumatic incident. So it's almost like a forced new normal, you have to go through and it's very disconcerting to people. Your mind, when it goes through a traumatic event catalogs everything that affects your 5 senses, smells, tastes, etc. Whatever you see, hear, taste, feel and smell, gets cataloged in your mind. It explains why the weirdest and strangest things, for example you hear elevator music from back in the 70s, a Disco Song but you hear, and all sudden, you're terrified. That reaction is disconcerting to people. As a therapist, I tried to let them know that this is normal. It is your brains way of trying to protect you.

I try to get very specific with my clients in terms of all the different triggers that they're feeling and also be ready for some ones that you don't even you're not even aware of yourself. You mentioned triggers after returning to work after 10 days.

Think of it like this, you had a horrific plane ride and then 10 days later, somebody forces you to get back on the plane? The triggers victims experience are all uniques to them and their experiences. I have a list of generic ones I will share with you. The first one is they feel a complete loss of control. For a victim of violent crime and a gun is involved, it's very common to feel a complete loss of control; you can lose your ability to think or reason.

Studies say most people in those types of situations, just panic, they freeze, they don't know what to do. There's a lot of guilt involved and they question themselves; they wish they would have done more or wish they would have said things differently. No one knows what they're going to do until they have a gun in their face.

Jen Lee

The question I dealt with after the robbery was, what could have happened? It haunted me. Afterwards I thought of such things as; we walked past the bathrooms, I was last in the line, he could have pulled me in there and raped to me. There are so many "what ifs" that could have happened in the situation. I had to figure out how to cope with that. I know my one assistant manager was like, Oh my God, if it was me, I would have passed out. But interestingly enough, you really don't know because it's much easier to be on the outside thinking oh, this is what I would do. But in reality, it could be totally different.

Alan Smith

Another example is victims are very self critical. You're trying to go over all the "what if" possibilities to the point you are trying to be perfect. You're trying to keep yourself as safe as possible and in doing it you put unrealistic expectations on yourself. People deal with the reality of this could happen again. It's what makes it difficult for your mind to relax and say, "it's okay, one bad thing happened. It shouldn't happen again." But it's possible.

One of the keys to healing is accepting this new normal that you need to have a more awareness. I think, in general, most people need more awareness. You know, it's difficult, it's hard to face it as a new normal, but it's part of the process of healing and being prepared. The more your mind thinks you're prepared, you can't prepare for everything, but the more prepared means the less anxiety people tend to feel over a lifetime, for over the course of time.

Other typical things are denial and shock. The healing process for those dealing with loss tend to run parallel with victims; denial, shock, anger, bargaining or trying to make sense of it, and finally, acceptance. It's very fluid, you could have a trigger and you're back to denial and shock, or back to anger. Those are typically the five stages victims of trauma go through.

Jen Lee

 When I first started dating my husband, he used to talk for me from behind. I heard the robbers boy voice behind me, and turned to see a gun pointed at me. When I would hear my husbands voice behind me, immediately I would feel fear and then anger. I would turn around and very gently say, babe, I can't have you talk to me like that, because it's making me really angry.I know you don't understand. It took me explaining that to him a few times, but but he gets it.

Alan Smith

 The startle response. You're talking about your fight or flight response, especially with violent crimes, you're facing your mortality. It's not the easiest thing to do. If you're walking across the street and a car is coming at you, you don't want to be thinking for the next 25 minutes what to do? You want massive energy to get the heck out of there. So when your fight or flight is triggered, after a traumatic incident, it's very difficult to turn it off; you have this heightened level of awareness.

You can re-experience the event in your mind in different ways, sometimes, even through nightmares. This is normal. Not easy.

I feel the best approach with vic tims is to talk to them straight. Let them know everything that might be going on to minimize the number of surprises. So when these things start to happen, they're going to be prepared and understand. It's so easy to slip into, "Oh my god, am I losing control again, am I crazy? " You feel like everything is so surreal. Like nothing is the same as before.

Jen Lee

I would ask myself, Why me? I don't think there is an answer to that? I think that asking yourself why me is just a normal process of the whole healing process.

Alan Smith

Your mind races, over all the possibilities, this is normal. To have an obsession with feeling safe. I'm going to use the word paranoia, but it's not really paranoia, because this could happen again. You're more suspicious of everything, you don't take anything for granted.

 I find in working with victims, one of the hardest things for them to deal with, is how hard they are in themselves. Why am I thinking this? What's wrong with me?

The earlier I can get to that type of thinking, the better the outcome. I let them know this is normal, and you're not doing anything wrong. The sooner I can help with this, the easier it is because in the long run, I think having those doubts about yourself becomes bigger than the trauma itself. People can become totally encapsulated in beating themselves up. Some victims can turn to alcohol and drugs or watching too much TV or gambling.

Jen Lee

 I actually I did a survey on one of our local neighborhood apps, because I wanted to get questions from other people to see what would interest them. Their question was, how do we learn to trust people again? And how do we learn to trust ourselves?

Alan Smith

It's a very complex question. But I'm going to route it back to what i call, "grounding thoughts", reasonable assumptions and ideas you can base your life on.

 You talk about a soul searching phenomenon to happen when you're a victim of violent crime or victim of a trauma. You question everything, your religious beliefs, what you think about other people? Are people inherently good? And based those grounding thoughts, coming up with ideas that are reasonable to move forward in. When somebody shifts from, "I think people are inherently good to inherently bad" from a trauma experience, it's very difficult to trust.

There's something called cognitive dissonance, like once you decide what the truth is, in your life, you only hear what validates your truth. It's taking all your assumptions and ideas, breaking them down and coming up with reasonable ideas that you can move forward with because it all comes back to intent.

In terms of therapy, what is it that your ultimate goal is? Is your ultimate goal to be safe,?, then you shouldn't trust or you shouldn't do any of that stuff.

 I think this whole pandemic kind of brought into that idea that there is risk in life. You know that we can't shut down forever. Like, ideally, I would love to shut down everything. But that brings in how many suicides from unemployment? drug addiction, all that kind of stuff. It's a lot of work with a client spent figuring out what their intent is in life, and kind of moving toward that direction. The direction of, acknowledging that leaving the house will be terrifying because it is a risk. It is much safer to stay at home. And, you know, make your world smaller and smaller. But that is not living.

Jen Lee

The basis of cognitive behavioral therapy, it makes a difference what you say to yourself.

Alan Smith

This is why these podcasts are great, because I think awareness is important. It's difficult because people live very busy lives and they don't spend their days wondering what it is like to be a victim. You don't think it's gonna happen to you. 1 in 4 people develop cancer, but it becomes very different when they tell you that a loved one or you have cancer. We hear the statistics, but never belieive we will become one.

Jen Lee

 As family members and friends, how do they support a victim?

Alan Smith

You know, everybody's had that experience where, after a loved one has died, you're at the funeral and you say, "I'm sorry." Then there's that awkward pause, and you don't really know what to do after that. Don't get down on yourself if your not sure how to handle the awkward pause.

Most people don't learn the skill of being present with somebody that's depressed or somebody that's highly anxious. You know, if you're a co worker that's always depressed, you tend to avoid them, right? You don't really want to be around that energy. But when it's when it's somebody that you know, that was once very vital and active, and they look so different and so forlorn than they used to be. It's a shock to everybody. It's like, the family has gone through it, too. I tend to give advice that's kind of direct. It's okay to go to the victim at some point and say, "What do you need from us?" You know, should we not talk about it? And look at this is going to be a process.

Jen Lee

It's important for family and friends to know it's okay if you don't know what you need to do. There are times, like me, I didn't know what I needed. I couldn't communicate any ideas. Just your presence of being there was enough for me in that moment.

Alan Smith

I think we underestimate the sense of presence in people's lives. You're not there to fix it, you're there to be present. And our culture tells us, there's going to be an app for it, right? There's going to be some way we're going to be able to fix it. You can't. Because again, this is triggered from the fight or flight. It does not go away right away. It gets better. I help people measure their progress is called through frequency, duration and intensity.

Frequency means, I'm having fewer times feeling like this; feeling down, feeling like I'm losing control.

Duration is, instead of 3 days, to process it, it took me a day and a half.

Intensity will be the last thing that goes because it's tied into your fight or flight. You just can't snap your fingers and say this is gonna go away.

Jen Lee

Alan, thank you so much for being here today. And you gave me the perfect closing, talking about presence. Here at I Need B lue, we want to be the presence for you, as a victim turned survivor to share your story. You're not alone. Part of the healing process is to talk and to share. I want to thank you again for listening to I Need Blue. I hope we have touched your life in some way and offered some valuable information. Again, we recommend professional help. I have had lots of therapy, I believe in it personally. So I'm telling you if you need it, don't be afraid, you will find it valuable. Thank you to our law enforcement and first responders. You are here to keep us safe. We thank you and you are very valuable. This is Jen Lee and Alan Smith. We thank you for listening to I Need Blue. Again, go to the website, www.ineedblue.net, subscribe and you can find us on all your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time, be safe. Be happy.

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