Episode 9 – Confront the weapon

I learned this week how scared I am of protecting myself. Kind of ironic when I have already been a victim of a violent crime. Why should I be afraid to be prepared, trained? I didn’t plan for this episode to be an extension of my story. Honestly, I thought my story was already told in its entirety.

When the anxiety, anticipation and tears started to fall, I realized I wasn’t done. I quickly realized there must be other survivors who have gone through the same thing. I must shed light on this unknown scenario I found myself in. This is my story of how I overcame the fear of looking at a handgun, holding a handgun, hearing gunshots, and knowing it’s my finger on the trigger. And it’s ok! I need not be afraid to protect myself and others.

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Trigger warning: some episodes contain graphic content including violence, abuse, murder and may not be suitable to all listeners. Please seek help if needed.

2 weeks ago, my husband said “there is an introduction to concealed carry class at a local family shooting center called FrogBones. Would you like to go?” I hesitated and said, “ok.” He signed us up for the class. A moment later I said to myself, “what have I done?”

Today’s episode is emotional. I will tell you that now. It snuck up on me. My husband has asked me to shoot a gun in the past. I would politely decline by saying, “I’m not afraid of guns. I just don’t want to shoot one.” He owns a handgun. I’ve never seen it; just the case it is stored in.

I grew up around guns. All type of guns and rifles. My boys had air soft guns. I would buy the guns for them. They were taught early on, especially from my dad, about gun safety. I reinforced the rules with them.

It thinks it fair to say, most military, law enforcement, and law-abiding citizens learn gun safety and training without experiencing a traumatic situation beforehand. Not me. I’m learning backwards. I’m a victim first, learning how to protect myself vs. someone learning to protect themselves to not become a victim.

Victims come with an arsenal of trauma. Some more than others, but we share the same fight to overcome it. I thought my internal struggles were over. It was a decade. I learned how to deal with triggers and thought I handled all of them. I was wrong.

I committed to attend this class with my husband. Questions started to penetrate my mind. Questions I had never asked myself. Why? I was never going to shoot a gun. I wasn’t afraid of them; I just didn’t desire to use one.

I could feel the anxiety. Apprehensive it might be an emotional trigger? I might find out I don’t like holding a gun? What about the sound of a gun firing? How am I going to react? I knew these questions were being triggered from my experience of turning around to face a gun pointed at me. A gun which was close enough I could touch it. These questions were on my mind throughout the week. Not heavily, but they existed

A few days later, my husband and I were enjoying a meal outside. We started talking about the class, guns, etc.

I laughed and said, “I might close my eyes when I shoot. I don’t’ know.” He recommended I don’t do that. The conversation awakened this lingering anxiety which I tried to avoid feeling.

He became quiet and I asked him what he was thinking, “I was thinking about what kind of gun would be good for you. I know you said a smaller one?” I said “yes, but I have to see if I am even able to do this. I may not even be able to hold the gun. I don’t know.” I said, “what if the sound of a gunshot scares me?”

Now I became quiet, and my wheels were turning. I knew I couldn’t be alone in my thoughts of apprehension and feeling of anxiety. What was it like for other victims? Do they know hidden fears may exists?

Suddenly, my decision to take this introduction to conceal carry class was spawning another purpose.

The next day, I decided to stop by FrogBones to discuss my idea; my own documentary of facing my fear and embracing how to use a gun; the same weapon, which a decade ago instilled such fear in me. I walked in the restaurant entrance and made my way around to the service counter.

I could hear the muffled sound of gun shots. I kept walking, so that was good. I noticed a lady behind a glass counter as the gun shots grew a little louder. I could see the rooms where people were shooting. I didn’t stare but looked. A little anxiety set in, but I remained focus on my mission.

I was given the GM’s name. He was on my list to call Monday. I walked out the same way I came in. I was proud I could hear the gunshots in the distance and be ok. Would I be ok when the shots were right next to me? I startle easy. We go for walks and if someone is approaching and honks their horn, it scares me. I jump. I hate that feeling.

I told myself one step at a time. Monday I would call and hopefully have a professional partner, along with my husband, to join me on this journey.

My phone call with Ethan, the GM, was reassuring. Knowing they have helped others like me, allowed him to guide me. Rather than a class setting, which could be triggering, he recommended a private lesson. He was going to get back to me with a suggestion to best fit my situation.

By the time I hung up with him, I was sweating. My hands were slightly shaking. I was asking for help, but in a different way. This was not therapy in the traditional sense. This trigger unknowing to me, held me captive. Fear is depilating. Unknown fear, even more so.

Later that day I received an email with steps on how to move forward. I was given Freddie’s name as the NRA certified instructor I needed to contact. It was 5 o’clock so I decided to put this off one more day and call him in the morning.

I gave Freddie the shortened version of my story. I could hear in his voice the empathy and dedication toward helping me. “One step at a time,” he said. I was scheduled to see him tomorrow morning, Weds morning.

At 7:10 a.m. I was getting ready to head out. My husband gave me a hug and I started to cry. I hated that. He sent me out the door with a hug and encouraging words. I cried the whole way there. My stomach was in knots. I knew I needed to do this, and I knew sometimes the anticipation was worse than the actual event. Or so I hoped. I was early and I sat in my car trying to get it together. I forgot my sunglasses so I couldn’t disguise my eyes.

Freddie and I met in the parking lot. “How are you?” he asked. “I’m trying to keep it together.” I said. I gave into the tears. I hated that. Again, I was in a position where I didn’t recognize myself. I wanted to hide my eyes; hide the weakness I was feeling. As I walked the flight of steps to the classroom, I was overwhelmed with emotions. He reassured me with words. “We will take it slow, make sure you are comfortable.” “You will experience all kinds of emotions and it’s ok.” He seemed to understand.

“Tell me about yourself.” He spoke. I shared my story with more details. He explained that most people won’t go thru situations like this in their lives; it made me unique. “You made it here. You should be proud of yourself.”

The next part was easy in the full scope of things. We reviewed slides about FL law and what is considered legal regarding conceal carry. It was interesting and I was doing well.

Next he gets a mat and lays it on the Formica table. He brings over a box. Out comes a clip and then dummy, or what is now known as Nerf, bullets. I sat in the chair, legs crossed, arms folded in front of me, my hands gripping my elbows looking for something stable to hold onto. My hands were freezing. I was keeping my urge to shake under control. I knew what was coming next…the gun.

I cried. I lowered my head to hide the liquid drops sliding down my cheeks. “It’s ok. I want you to remember it’s just metal and plastic. It can’t hurt you.” Freddie said. “This is what is going to help protect you and others.” I glanced up at the gun. It took me back to the moment I turned around and saw the gun in the robbers’ hands. In that moment any black handgun was going to look like the gun which threatened me. One of the things I remember about the robber’s gun is it was missing the orange cap on the front indicating it was a toy. This gun didn’t have the orange cap either.

I made it over the hurdle of seeing a handgun up close. Close enough that I could touch it. And missing the orange cap signifying to me, this gun was real too.

He sat the gun on the table behind him and turned his focus back to the clip.

I watched him finish his demonstration with the clip, how to load bullets, put the clip back in the gun etc.

He picked up the gun again. Sitting in front of me, he started to talk about the different parts. How to hold it, where your fingers should be, your stance and many other things. It was a lot to take in especially since my mind and emotions were still reeling from my emotional reaction to seeing the gun. I almost stopped because I felt I wasn’t absorbing information like I should. I pressed on because I know we absorb more than we realize. I also know repetition was the best way for me to learn.

I anticipated what may happen next. The nervousness was kicking in again.

He sat down next to me. My hands were in my lap resting. The gun was missing the clip and the chamber was empty. “Hold it.” Freddie gently said. I flipped my hands over, still resting in my lap. He gently placed the gun in my hand. I closed my eyes and cried. I heard his words of reassurance and encouragement. I felt his patience. I slowly opened my eyes, looked up at him and said, “it won’t hurt me, but it is what instilled fear in me.”

Imagine the mental and emotional contradiction you go through. I believe people hurt people. I never blamed the gun. That is not my belief before or after the robbery. While I don’t blame this gun, it has such a hold on me. A decade later. I didn’t expect this. When do you hear, confront the weapon? I guess I just did!

I was able to touch it, hold it. We stood up and he wanted me to make a stance. I did. We practiced how to hold it, finger placement, cocked it. There is a process, through repetition and practice, it becomes easier. This was a start. With the chamber empty, I put my finger on the trigger and pulled.

Through the anticipation, anxiety, uncertainty, and tears, I made it this far. “ I’m so proud of you.” said Freddie. “I know. I wasn’t sure I could do it. I’m proud of myself too.” I spoke.

“Would you like to go to the range and live fire?” Freddie asked. Without hesitation I said, “no.” The next step for me was how am I going to react with the sound of a gunshot? and what kind of kickback was this gun going to have? I had success today and was going to leave with that in my pocket. Freddie was very supportive; I didn’t doubt for a second, he wouldn’t be.

Facing fears is exhausting; mentally and emotionally. You need to sleep to allow your body to, I guess you could say, discharge and recharge. I made it home and told my husband. He was proud of me. Shortly after, I said I’m going to lay down.

The next morning, I would meet Freddie again. A new day and a new hurdle.

I put my finger on the trigger and pulled. There is one thing stronger in me than fear and that is my determination.