

1 GVP6 Shantell Riley

2 D: Please state your name.

3 S: Shantell Riley.

4 D: And Shantell, have you ever been affected in some form or manner with gun violence?

5 S: Actually yes, I was. I actually lost my oldest son. He was twenty-three in 2016. It was actually
6 March of 2016. He actually was murdered from—by a person who actually had a handgun. And I
7 mean, I can, well, let's go back to the beginning of the story. So, one, that night, my son was
8 with one of his friends that got a call from his sister and was saying that, ya know, that his dad
9 was about to beat up on their mom and she wanted her brother to come to the house. Which the
10 brother was with my son. So, he-- the son pretty much was saying, like, ya know, like he's tired
11 of his dad actually, you know, doing this to his mom and he wanted to go over to the house to
12 kind of, like intervene with the situation and he heard the desperation with his sister so he was
13 like, "I need to do something". So, my son went with him, it was him and another young man
14 had went with him to the house and in the process of the son confronting his father, the father
15 went and got the gun and came out and was shooting and shot my son who actually never entered
16 the house. He was in the doorway. And I found that out through the trial and everything, that he
17 was in the doorway so he never entered the house. And, yeah. So, he shot him, which, where he
18 actually shot him, that they found his body basically a couple houses down, away from the
19 location in which he was actually killed.

20 D: So, they tried to hide it?

21 S: No, he was running out—my son ran out of the house.

22 D: Oh.

23 S: So, like, you know, like that adrenaline rush that happens, like after something, ya know,
24 something like that, like that, fight or flight. Like, he, yeah, so he was fight and flighting at the
25 same time. But, yeah, but he ended up just pretty much just dying because of the, the wound that
26 he had. So, yeah, yeah affected, yeah—so I was affected a major way because of gun violence,
27 yes.

28 D: The person who shot your son, did he ever apologize? Did he have remorse, show any
29 remorse?

30 S: No, I actually had the ability to—I actually met the, the young man before the incident
31 actually happened because there was the dynamics of the family relationships. And they knew of
32 family members, including this gentleman who had actually been over to my house before and
33 everything, so I actually met this young man before. And during the trial, there was no remorse.
34 Like, he, he actually blamed it on his son. Like, if it wasn't for his son, ya know, like, this is
35 basically kind of, like, his fault. So, he had no accountability on top of that. And he actually had
36 previous gun charges prior to this incident too, so, so yeah, so, really not really super apologetic.
37 Even during sentencing he really wasn't apologetic about it. So, and I actually told the court,
38 like, during the sentencing is that basically, your system allowed him opportunities to finally kill
39 somebody. Because he was a convicted felon and that wasn't supposed to have possession of a
40 firearm prior to that incident. Prior to *that* incident, he was a convicted felon who wasn't
41 supposed to have possession of a firearm. So, so, firearm, firearm, and then now, yet again, the
42 third time you have a possession of a firearm, you finally kill somebody.

43 D: Mmm.

44 S: So, yeah. And yeah, just the lack of accountability was a really big challenge to see. And just
45 really no remorse during the whole trial, about it.

46 D: What was the court's response since this was his third time caught with a gun? Did they give
47 him a long sentence?

48 S: Well, he ended up being convicted for a second-degree reckless homicide. And you learn
49 about those things when you start to go through these processes and, and compared to the
50 original charge was first-degree reckless homicide and so, then he ended up getting convicted for
51 second-degree reckless. And they, they threw that because you know, 'course a part of the
52 sentencing is like, their character and previous offenses. And you know, they mentioned it about
53 him having the possession, ya know, of a firearm he wasn't supposed to. But I-- there really
54 wasn't, like, I feel like they're, when they say it, they say it as part of the, the conditions from the
55 previous, ya know, sentence. Or a previous conviction. It's not necessarily saying like, this
56 person, ya know. So, you blatantly, like I told them, he blatantly, dis- ya know, disrespected and
57 just basically what you guys told him about not having a firearm, he just threw that out the
58 window. He did whatever he wanted to do, so, basically, he showed you that he really didn't care
59 what you told him. (laughter) So, but yet again, you guys gave him opportunity after opportunity
60 and then now, he finally killed somebody because ya know, the way that you guys have this set
61 up. You just tell him, like, "Eh, you're not supposed to be in the possession of a firearm." It's
62 kind of like, ya know, "Eh, you know, make sure you wash your hands when you leave the
63 bathroom." It's basically how that went. So, it was just like, you just said it because it's
64 something you need to say. But they don't really take that to heart, obviously. They just don't.

65 D: So, was he—what was he sentenced for, do you know?

66 S: Yeah, like I said, second-degree reckless homicide. He ended up getting—

67 D: I mean, how many years?

68 S: Yeah, so, he ended up getting twenty years stay inside, and then fifteen years extended
69 supervision. Which, I mean, you know, like I said, I read the laws and the statutes and everything
70 during this process and that's kind of—he actually got more. And the reason why the judge gave
71 him more because one, of his character during the trial because he was not accepting
72 accountability and then like I explained to him that, you know, you guys refer to my son as, first
73 you called his name wrong, then you said that—you refer to him as a deceased, ya know, and the
74 victim constantly, ya know. Like, my son had a name, ya know. Like, well first, let me give you
75 the right name. And two, I was like what you guys don't know when you just say these things, I
76 was like, he was a father. So, he had a son. So, like now, ya know, this man turned my grandson
77 into a statistic. He's not gonna be raised by someone because of the fact that you took him away.
78 So, so because of those things, they ended up increasing the sentence time, which I was grateful
79 for. Because, I mean, it's, it's already traumatizing enough to go through the trial, ya know, and
80 knowing that there's a possibility that a person could not be convicted, is, it's a whole different
81 type of, ya know, situation and feelings that you have to deal with that, so. That you end up
82 being grateful 'cause by the time we were through with the trial, it was like, I just really want my
83 grandson to one day know that somebody was accountable for what happened to his father.

84 D: Right.

85 S: You know, and the reason why he's not here, so. So, yeah, we, we accepted that.

86 D: Okay. What would you say, well, I know the aftermath is definitely the loss of your son, but
87 how has it affected your family as a whole?

88 S: It changed our family, I mean, we lost a family member that we really didn't plan on losing,
89 ya know, at any time, not soon, for that matter. Anyway, and like I said, my son had a son, so my
90 grandson grows up without a father, which they were—you saw one, you saw the other. So, they

91 were connected like that, and just like, watching that relationship develop and grow. My
92 grandson was seventeen months at the time when my son was taken away. And to know that one
93 day, that you know, all of those things that he would've been there for, he's not there for. You
94 have a lot of sad moments about that. It changed our family structure. Because my g-- my son
95 was actually, also, like, a helpful caregiver for my grandmother when she was alive. So, when he
96 was taken away, then we had to yet again restructure, like, different things of how we were
97 gonna make sure we accommodate her staying at home. Like, just—I mean, the house was
98 different. You know? Just, now when you came home, you knew something—there was a big,
99 big void in that house. Like, it took me a while to go through, like, his clothes, like I waited for
100 his brother because I didn't wanna touch anything until he came, you know, home and we would
101 be able to go through those things and figure out what we were keeping and what we were going
102 to eventually donate, so it's probably a little over a year before I actually donated items to the
103 victim men's shelter. Just because of the fact ya know, it's, it was difficult to process. It was hard
104 to process. And there's still times where I can drive down the street and I see people who will
105 like, physically have a stature like him. You have like a moment where you just kind of come out
106 of reality, you think like, "Oh my god, that's him!" And then, ya know, then all a sudden reality
107 kicks back in, like, no, it can't be him. So, it's, so, even still, you still have that challenge of not,
108 you're livin' between two universes, in a sense. Yeah, just, there was a big, just a big change for
109 us and not something that you're ever really prepared for, so.

110 D: I don't wanna expose any specific area, but can you give me the general area of where the
111 shooting happened?

112 S: As far as, like, the side of town, or a physical body?

113 D: Mmm, how about maybe the side of town.

114 S: North side, so [Lindsay Heights], whatever that refers to. So, yeah, yes.

115 D: And what would you say to legislators about gun violence or how would you suggest they
116 could rectify the problems with gun violence?

117 S: I feel like, that the law or the, the added-on condition of having convicted felons, you get a
118 extra time if you are in possession of a firearm. But the challenge about that is that when you
119 have a person who's had an offense who's been told that, then, they turn around and have
120 another offense again and get told that, and then the third time, get another offense—as we're
121 being told this, the first and the second time, but yet, and still have possession of a firearm. That
122 it's telling you that, that they obviously, that particular person – because all individuals
123 circumstances are different—but that particular person is basically telling you that regardless of
124 what you tell them, the terms and conditions and whatever charges, or whatever time they're
125 gonna have to serve doesn't matter. They're not really, they're not really afraid of that. They
126 don't really care about that. Because if they can go do it a second time, they're already telling
127 you that they're really not caring about that. So, it should be something you should consider if
128 your first offense comes back as a second offense with the same type of situation, A.K.A a
129 firearm, they're giving you a warning sign that despite what you've told them, the ability for
130 them to rationalize why they shouldn't is pretty much out the window, so, they're basically
131 telling you, “Well, great that you've said that, but I'm still gonna do whatever I, I want to do
132 anyway.” So, you might have to consider that, you know, that second offense. That you have to
133 be responsible to protect the public.

134 D: Right.

135 S: And a person who can give you a second offense is already telling you that they're not
136 obligated to be concerned about the public. So, it then should be your responsibility to make sure

137 that you protect the public. So, you might have to get a little bit tougher when it comes down to
138 these, the gun laws, because, like I said, the first offense they're already, ya know, there's your
139 chance, your second offense, they're telling you they don't care.

140 D: Right.

141 S: And like I said, when they come back with a third or fourth, and you're mentioning the same
142 thing. When I watch the news, I hear that quite often. You know, that they love to point that
143 out—that a person, ya know, is a convicted felon with the possession of a firearm after
144 someone's been murdered. So, it's like, so what does that tell you? So, it tells you that the laws
145 that you've created are kind of outdated and they don't apply anymore. So, you might need to
146 reevaluate that and make that something that applies to protecting your public.

147 D: I agree. What would you say to a mom or a dad who recently lost their son?

148 S: (pause) It's gonna be hard. It's gonna be hard 'cause your life is going to change in such a
149 way that you, there's no way to ever prepare for it, that you, you have to literally take each
150 moment that you get because it puts you in a, such a different place that you don't, you don't
151 have the ability to manage a full day. So, ya know, if you're breathing right now, then right
152 now's good, you know. And the fact that a lot of people probably won't be able to relate, ya
153 know, and totally understand, ya know, that experience or that people are really trying to be
154 genuine and caring and we don't really take it as it comes off that way. 'Cause we are like, "You
155 don't get it."

156 D: Right, right.

157 S: But to be able when you're ready to connect with someone who has been on that part of the
158 journey that you're on is really important. Because they do get it. And being able to have that
159 support of a person that actually does get it is really, it's really important for you to be able to

160 move forward. So, I would say that would probably be—and just breathe. Breathe. ‘Cause it’s
161 the hardest thing to do after that, so, breathe.

162 D: After the death of your son, you’ve created something special. And it is the Death Café, tell
163 me more about it.

164 S: So, Death Café actually is a, it’s a nonprofit organization that actually originate in London.

165 Which is, I sometimes feel like that’s where I need to be ‘cause a lot of those things that are
166 adapted and they’re embraced in other countries (laughter) so, yeah, by a—a gentleman by the

167 name of John Underwood who actually created it based off of, there was a Swedish sociologist

168 by the name of Bernard Crettaz and, for Café Mortals. And sociologists know that one of the

169 things that connects us as human beings is food, socialization and food. So, I was like, “Bring

170 ‘em together with some sweet treats and we can talk about our, our mortality.” Which kind of

171 creates people a little bit of vulnerability. So, John Underwood got up just to that and said, you

172 know what, I need to bring that to our, to our country, something we can definitely benefit from.

173 And I came across it and said, “I need to bring that to our community ‘cause it’s something we

174 could benefit from.” So basically, it’s—I love it, the format because there’s no agenda. It’s not

175 getting people to walk away and say, “Well, I have to resolve to do this today.” Or, ya know,

176 come and have plans to, ya know, like, to, to make something different or create some type or

177 action behind it. But, what happens is that people have conversations that get you thinking. It

178 allows you to be open, it allows you to be vulnerable to talk about a topic that people typically

179 don’t wanna talk about, which is death. But then there’s the underlying motive about that, it’s to

180 allow people to understand that one day we’re all going to leave this Earth, but what do we do

181 with the moments we have left here? So, we have an opportunity to make memories, we have an

182 opportunity to leave a legacy, we have an opportunity to create an impact—what do we do with

183 the time that we have left? So, to be able to create space for people, like, I love it. It's just the
184 fact that we get to create space for people to come together and be able to talk about something
185 that we know everyone's not comfortable talking about. And what I constantly say about it,
186 when I advertise it on Facebook, I tell people, "Come for the cake, stay for the conversation."
187 Because, cake is actually one of the requirements. That's the reason why I actually did it—nah
188 I'm joking! (laughter) Part of it was that, ya know, cake is actually part of one of the
189 requirements that you have to have either cake or cookies or some type of dessert treat for the
190 attendees of Death Café. So, I'm like, "Wow, really, cake?" Like, I, ya know, I love cake. So, ya
191 know, I'm quite sure there's other people who will just come for the cake. But truthfully, come
192 for the cake and stay for the conversation because you, you don't know where, ya know, your
193 thought process might me, or you might be sitting in a room with someone might be saying
194 exactly what you're thinking. And like I said, just being able to hold space for people to be able
195 to do that is, is just an awesome thing, so, yes. And so yeah, I do it every third Sunday of the
196 month and I've had people approach me about attempting to do other days, like a week day and
197 I've thought about it and I threw it out there, in a poll on Facebook, but that's my only, like, kind
198 of like, big source to be able to communicate with people right now, but ya know, I always say,
199 "I pray for one." So, if I get one, that's the opportunity to continue to do the next one. So, like if
200 there was one person that was actually interested to do it on a weekday evening, I would be more
201 than willing to do it on a weekday evening because we need the space to be able to talk about it
202 and know that it's a safe space to be able to talk about it, so, so yeah. I create—I brought it here,
203 put it like that. (laughter) Brought it to Milwaukee and wanted to be consistent about bringing it
204 to Milwaukee.

205 D: Well, I'm glad you did.

206 S: Yes, thank you.

207 D: Is there anything you'd like to add?

208 S: (pause) I feel like we operate in silos. As individuals, here. And not just—I don't wanna say
209 it's just exclusively Milwaukee, but what I've learned, I—I participated in a, a support group, a
210 grief support group, for mothers who have, or parents as a whole who have lost their children
211 through violence. And I went to the meeting and I really, I told the lady the first time that I didn't
212 really wanna go because meetings typically have no purpose, ya know, people typically fall off
213 the agendas or they don't stay focused and it becomes something and it spirals into not the
214 intention of what it was supposed to be set up for and so, she created it and I went and for me,
215 that was the first time that I actually felt like with my circumstance that I was not alone. 'Cause I
216 walked in the room and I remember the two ladies that were there the first time, and it was like,
217 you had this relief knowing that it was, one, sadness because you know why they were there and
218 then, two was the relief knowing that, "I'm not the only one." 'Cause you feel like you are the
219 only one going through that situation when you are going through it, like nobody, it's not a
220 common thing, even though I, I kind of sometimes question that nowadays. But it's that knowing
221 that there's someone else out there, like you, experiencing something similar that you're
222 experiencing because what I've learned about grief is that depending on the loss. How you
223 process that, and the grief kind of flows a little differently, so a child that's lost their parent due
224 to advanced age is a little different of processing it than of a child that's lost their parent, ya
225 know, through a car accident or a parent losing a child through a miscarriage, ya know, or being
226 a stillbirth. All of those get processed in a different way, and what happens is that because we
227 don't, we're not open and communicating about these things, that you tend to go into your little
228 silo about it. Because you can't talk to the friends, ya know, even the family members, like they

229 don't have the same types of feelings and emotions and understanding about that, that situation
230 that you have. And they all care and they wanna be there, but there's something about finding
231 someone who has a similar experience to you that creates a vulnerability and a connection that
232 allows you to, it helps with the grief process actually, ya know, and having someone that's there
233 that actually gets it. So, I would say that if we could start to come out of the silos and one, being
234 able to have more spaces and knowing that the spaces are available for people to be able to come
235 together about those particular types of things, that it will help our community as a whole be able
236 to move forward from the things that we're actually, we're struggling with. So, yeah.

237 D: Well said.

238 S: Thank you.

239 D: Thank you! (laughter) Wow.