

1 VGV #80 Heather Kirsch

2 D: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What is your age?

3 H: I'm [50] years old.

4 D: And your race?

5 H: White.

6 D: And your gender?

7 H: Female.

8 D: What neighborhood or area of Milwaukee do you live? And I know you don't live in

9 Milwaukee, that's okay.

10 H: Then I am part of the Washington County, but we moved to Ozaukee County in Grafton after
11 my son was murdered.

12 D: How long have you lived there?

13 H: For the Washington County in West Bend, we lived there for 23 years, yeah 23 years. And
14 then Grafton we lived [5] years.

15 D: Do you remember where your story happened?

16 H: [Clock Tower Acres area] on the south side of Milwaukee.

17 D: So, okay, so you said where. Now I'd like to hear your story of gun violence.

18 H: Well, my son was hanging out. He lived on the east side, his friend lived on the south side.

19 They went out to an event one night; I forgot what it was for. [After the event they went around
20 bar hopping just a little bit before they were heading back to his friend's house.] They decided to

21 walk down the street to the apartment where he lived. As they are walking, a man came out of

22 the alley and grabbed Dylan's friend and said, "Get in the alley and empty all your pockets." He

23 broke loose and ran and told Dylan to run. As [Dylan] was running away, the man shot his gun,

24 and it went through his back out his front abdomen and he hit the pavement. [...] His friend

25 called the cops and called the ambulance and Dylan gave his testimony, but when he got to the
26 hospital they couldn't figure out where the bleeding [was coming] from. And it must have went
27 through his abdomen, the big artery. He made it 6 and a half hours of all the stuff they tried to
28 do, but he didn't get saved and he died.

29 D: My God. Can you tell me the age, race, and gender of your son?

30 H: 22 years old, white, and what was it again?

31 D: Gender.

32 H: [Male].

33 D: And was the person who shot your son, was he caught?

34 H: Yes. He was caught on July 10th, 2017.

35 D: And what was his race and approximate age and gender? I know I said "His," but.

36 H: I think he's 32, African American, and I forgot what you asked. I think I answered all of
37 them.

38 D: Yeah, how has this experience affected you and your family?

39 H: Well, since –Dylan got murdered, I think our whole family has changed. For me, it doesn't
40 seem like my family is the same at all. We went from, you know, family get-togethers and
41 having a good time and we visited Dylan all the time, went out to lunches. My daughter is two
42 years younger than him, and they always were really close, and she is having a very hard time. I
43 don't feel like my life is anything the same, I just feel like I'm stuck in that moment. My life
44 hasn't been moving forward. I just think that it was taken at the wrong time. I think Dylan had a
45 lot to offer. He supported his LGBTQ community, he also supported all of his friends and his
46 family. He was always there for everybody and was going to continue school at MATC. He just
47 had so much to offer and yet now, I know as a mother you try to do everything right for your
48 children, you raise them right to be good people, and then all of a sudden someone changes that

49 fate and takes them away from you. So, I don't know. I just feel like I have to offer and do
50 something more for his legacy and make a difference so other people don't have to go through
51 this like I did. And other families don't have to lose their special people.

52 D: Do you think this has affected the community?

53 H: For where he lived, yes. For where he worked and when he had the funeral, we had the
54 funeral, there was a lot of people I didn't even know, for how many people showed up, just
55 because my son touched, their hearts and made a difference in their lives and impacted them, it
56 was sad because I never knew Dylan did so much for the community. I even met people who
57 when they did their men's or guy's weekend, there were people I met in different places. I would
58 tell my son's story and all of a sudden, they said, "Oh, I know him. I met him in Chicago. He
59 stayed up all night and they were teachers [from Oregon] and he talked and talked." And that
60 touched them so that they remembered him, and I mean, it's nice to hear other people's stories of
61 how much that he's blessed other people, you know? Even people at school that he's met and
62 stuff like that.

63 D: That's beautiful that you met so many people that you didn't even know who surprised you
64 with these great stories about your baby. How beautiful. What a gift. How do you think the
65 situation could have been avoided?

66 H: (pause). Well in this situation, I believe it could have been avoided because he shouldn't have
67 [been released without the ankle bracelet and told to come back the next morning to get it back
68 on. He obtained a gun and he was a felon.] I think the rules need to be changed for, what is it
69 called, extended supervision. Things have got to change [the way] they're doing things because
70 people are getting out, they have specific rules, and they need to follow them. But the biggest
71 thing is the guns. I mean, they get them, wherever they are getting them, but if he wouldn't have
72 had [the ankle bracelet on, he wouldn't have had the chance to be in that alley], Dylan would be

73 here.

74 D: You said that the perpetrator was caught. Is he presently in prison?

75 H: Yes.

76 D: What do you think we can do to eliminate or lower gun violence?

77 H: (pause). Well [for me], I'm sorry I have to read my [sheet] because, this is the hardest part,
78 because literally, I've been contemplating this all, a lot, even since Dylan died. In reality, it's like
79 it's never going to stop because it goes on every day, somebody is always dying from gun
80 violence. The only thing I can say is, and I am going to read what I wrote because it's hard for
81 me to always remember everything. They need to do universal background checks. They need to
82 close those loopholes because too many people are actually going out of places of Wisconsin just
83 to go get guns, especially if they are not even supposed to have guns. And we need to get the
84 guns out of the hands of the mentally ill, the unstable kids, the criminals, the gangs, and others
85 who want to seek harm and it's out of control because they need to pass reforms so innocent
86 people can live. It's terrifying that people live in an area, and you don't even know if you're
87 going to be safe tomorrow. Your family members are being taken and you don't have no control
88 over it. You can't stop it. But yet nobody hears us. There's so many people who have lost their
89 family and no matter how hard we say anything, nobody wants to hear it. And they need to open
90 their ears and hearts to understand what we are going through because it's not ending. It's going
91 further. It's beyond control. So, yeah.

92 D: I think those are great suggestions. Real, and I agree with you. Do you have a photo that you
93 will be sharing with your story?

94 H: I'm going to be sending one. I don't have one right here.

95 D: That's great. What would you like to say to the elected officials?

96 H: I would like them to know that the pain never goes away. Hugs don't fill the void. We need
97 them to set aside their differences with each other and start focusing on stuff for us out here, for
98 the communities. They need to help with the gun reforms, [bails are too low], and put better
99 policies to protect our communities from the violence and to listen to the victims of tragedy. It's
100 never ending. The violence needs to stop. My son can't vote or voice his opinions. He believed
101 in freedom, but also safety and accountability and that's what I'm going to do for his voice and
102 his legacy. I am going to make people accountable and things to change because I don't want any
103 other mothers to have to go through what I've gone through. And it's not easy. It's devastating to
104 live every day without your baby. And I don't know, I talk about him everywhere I go.

105 D: What would you say to the community?

106 H: The community needs to stand up and fight for change also. I know some people fear, some
107 people are scared, but if they would all come together and stick with the people who even lost
108 their children and show, just to support. We got to get something to change, and they can't fear. I
109 mean, we got to step up and make the changes. Somebody's got to do it. We got to do it soon
110 because it's getting out of control.

111 D: Tell us about the initiative that you started since Dylan's death, or since Dylan's murder.

112 H: Initiative?

113 D: Your initiative, didn't you start a nonprofit or are about to start an organization or a group?

114 H: Yeah, well I started a Dylan Steffen Foundation. It took me a while to figure out what exactly
115 I wanted to do. [I looked into] Mom's Demand Action Against Gun Violence. I also [I looked
116 into] WAVE [and Bo's Heavenly Clubhouse]. I [want] to help other families who [have lost]
117 somebody who got shot. I did that last year; I think it was 2020. I do fundraisers every year and I
118 try to help somebody or some group or something. [I am working on a Dylan law, I had to figure
119 out what I actually wanted to do and include. I'm going to put money and then I'm saving money

120 in case there is ever some mother who goes through what I went through, and I can maybe help
121 them.]

122 D: That is beautiful. Is there anything you would like to add?

123 H: No. I just hope that something can be changed about this instead of it keep, (inaudible) where
124 people can come together and make changes for the community. Like, the mothers who are
125 losing their children and their loved ones because of the gun violence, especially in Milwaukee,
126 our governor, and our mayor, I know our mayor is not picked yet, but we need to, they need to
127 start doing something, all of these people need to start realizing what they took their job for. If I
128 was a judge or a governor, what was your purpose in the first place? I feel like they sit there, and
129 they don't hear us. They don't, it's like they don't see it on TV. Now I know the Sheriff is saying
130 they want gun violence to stop, it's been terrible the last five years. So, people just need to step
131 up and we have to get it to stop. I mean, I have no idea, but I know that my focus is I want to get
132 all the way to the top. I want my name known, and I want them to have my mouth be heard.
133 Because I lost somebody who was so close to me and now, I don't have him, and I have to live
134 every day and night and I had no way to stop it. So, but I will do something so I can prevent it
135 for some other people.

136 D: That's going to be great in the promo (laughs).

137 H: Thank you.

138 D: Thank you so much. I want to stop the recording.

139 PART TWO

140 D: So, when you, your son got to the hospital, you had some issues with Froedtert Hospital. Tell
141 us what happened.

142 H: Well first, when they called me, they, the way they did phone etiquette did not please me at
143 all because anybody who would get told what I got told on the phone would make anybody

144 hysterical. Thank God I'm a little more of a calm person and I got my kids ready, and we got out
145 the door. But as we got there, I asked them, we had to wait for a little bit, like half an hour to go
146 up, so when he was ready, the lady I asked, I said, "Well can you please tell him we are here?
147 Because we have a connection, so at least it will keep him calm." And she's like, "Well we told
148 him we called you, that's good enough." And I thought, "Okay, really?" And then as we were
149 put in a room because something was wrong, they came back and told us that when they sat him
150 up, the blood was going on his back. And when I first came in front of the doctor, I said, "Did
151 you give him a, [CAT scan]. And they said no because he [will only make it] 20 minutes. And I
152 thought again, well, what does that matter? I said, "People come to the hospital to have their
153 lives saved." And they said, "Well, he was over 18 and it doesn't matter what you say, because
154 he's [over] 18." So, I'm like, again, I feel like being as a mother, they didn't really care what I
155 said. So, at this point, they went by Dylan, and they cut him open to check all his organs, where
156 the blood was coming from. And again, I said, "Don't you check the exit hole? It went through
157 his back and out the left abdomen. And it would have probably hit the big artery." Again, they
158 didn't listen to me. So instead, they are opening him up, looking through all the organs, trying to
159 figure out where the blood is coming from. They came back and said, "Nope. We can't figure out
160 where this blood is coming from." And I'm like, "Really?" So then after that, they set him up
161 again and during the time before we got there, they put him in an induced coma. And it wasn't
162 like he can't fight for life; he did have a (inaudible). So, I notify (inaudible). But they sat here
163 and told me that after he got checked for that, he finally woke up. And he had that big tube in his
164 throat and the doctor said, "Are you in pain?" and he just wanted to say something, but he
165 couldn't, because he had a big tube [in his throat]. So, after that, I said, "Why didn't you give
166 him a piece of paper? He could have wrote down what he was saying." It's not like he couldn't
167 write, he just couldn't talk. And I think he wanted his family. I mean, he's the one who told us in

168 the beginning, or told the doctors to call me. So, he knows I wouldn't not be there. I've always
169 been there for my kids no matter what. So, after that, because [he] got pissed off because [they]
170 wouldn't help him, he coded, and they had to break open his chest and massage his heart for 45
171 minutes. So, during six and a half hours of all this stuff my son had to endure, [...] I feel like he
172 didn't make it because he probably knew he was going to be a vegetable or something and my
173 son would not be happy to live like that. And I sure wouldn't want to make the choice for
174 anything either because that would have been hard on me. But I think for that six and a half
175 hours he went through, he was my [oldest]. He endured the worst, and he should not have had to
176 go through that either. So, I'm still going to fight on that one because people who have family
177 that have been shot need to be also looked into and their kids or family member, they need to
178 fight to save them. I don't care if they got shot or whatever, they are still people. And you can't
179 just say, well, we get them all the time. And assume that they are going to die. My son was 22
180 years old. And had so much ahead of him. And yet I'm the one that has to sit here and think
181 about it every day. Either which way, always fight for what's right.

182 D: So, you think that Froedtert didn't really, wasn't concerned or take it as seriously as they
183 should have because he was a shooting victim?

184 H: I don't think they took it seriously at all. They were in by me more than they were in by my
185 son. And every time they came in by me, I said, "Of course you're having updates. You're in by
186 me more than you are by my son." I said, "Get your butt in there and do something." I said, "it's
187 not fair." And yet we get stuck here and we don't know what's going on. And I just, I feel like if
188 they would have figured out where the hole was and clipped it, I think they could have done
189 something to save them. But instead, I just feel like they did not take it seriously. I mean, I don't
190 know. I know I'm not a doctor. But common sense would have been, obviously with that much
191 blood, that it's something big artery. And they didn't even look for the exit hole. So, I don't

192 know. [...] This goes round and round in my head all the time and it still plays out the same. And
193 if he was in the door at least saying, "Call my mom." I mean, he was at that point. So, getting to
194 that last part, they weren't checking good enough. And I know it's a teaching hospital. But when
195 it comes to that seriousness, they need to put things aside and just figure things out.

196 D: I agree. You said when the hospital called you, what did they say to you when they called you
197 initially?

198 H: They asked me if I was the mom of Dylan Steffen, and I said yes. And they said, "Well, this
199 is Froedtert Hospital. I'm in the emergency room" or wherever they are. And then they said my
200 son was shot left by on the corner for dead. And they said something about how he was gray.
201 And I said, "Who the heck taught you phone etiquette? You don't say this to anybody like this."
202 All you do is you call and say, "Are you the mother of blah blah blah," and then you say, "Yes,"
203 and then they say, "Well will you please come to the hospital?" That's all you say. You don't say
204 what's wrong. You don't say what happened. Because, I mean, if I—my daughter said I was
205 going a little fast on the highway, but not really. If I was somebody else, I would have really
206 been going fast because some people don't think. They are trying to get to their baby and stuff
207 like that. But her phone etiquette, I tried to tell the hospital about that too and they just didn't
208 care.