

Episode 07: Vincent witnessed a teen die by gunshot

Vincent lives and works in Chicago as a photojournalist. He takes a lot of pictures, and a lot of those pictures include crime scenes. In his line of work, he's used to getting the call, and going to where the news is happening.

But there was one night when he didn't have to go anywhere. The crime scene was just outside his front door. That was the night 17 year old Michael Patton was gunned down during a thunderstorm.

Vincent heard the shots, and ran outside while his wife called 911. The teenager had been shot in the chest and in the head, and he died while Vincent held his hand.

We talked about Vincent's perspective on this experience, both as a photographer and journalist, and as a father. An experience like this is certainly something that none of us wants to go through.

If you'd like to contact Vincent, or see some of his photography, you can do so by checking out a project he's currently working on, called Lost Americana. You can see that at lostamericana.com.

Vincent also wrote an article for the Chicago Sun-Times about this incident. I'll have a link to that in the show notes for this episode, at whatwasthatlike.com/07

And now, here's my conversation with Vincent.

Scott

Vincent, thanks for coming to the show!

Vincent

Hey, I'm glad to be here.

Scott

You are a photojournalist. In your work, have you ever witnessed death before?

Vincent

I haven't seen any death up close in my work like this. I've been to crime scenes before. There have definitely been places where there were shooting and somebody passed away. Usually, getting this close to a body, I guess, is not something that's normal. Police are usually pretty far back. In this situation, it just happened to be at my front doorstep. So, it was kind of hard and it pushed me back any farther than I already was.

Scott

Before we get into what actually happened that night, can you tell us a little bit about your neighborhood? What's that like? What's your street like?

Vincent

Oh, my street? Well, at the time, it was pretty quiet - it's still pretty quiet. I don't live on that block anymore, but I didn't leave because of this. I actually still live in the same neighborhood. I'm actually farther in my neighborhood - on the outskirts of it - now. It's a working-class African American neighborhood, for the most part - it's called Bronzeville. It's on the south side of Chicago. It's a little quiet treeline one-way street - it doesn't get much traffic. In the middle of the

afternoon, it's really easy to get parking there because everybody's at work. You heard a lot about the south side, but it's not the same south side that is on the nightly news where there are murder sprees or something like that.

Scott

I'm in Florida. I've been to Chicago a few years ago, but you hear a lot about so much violence, gunfire, and everything. Do people there have, kind of, a mentality or a constant state of fear? What's the mentality people of living in that area?

Vincent

The south side of Chicago was huge. Chicago, in general, is huge. I mean, it's the third-largest city, population-wise. I don't know how big it is, but it's not like what everybody makes it out to be. A lot of people there are working-class. They're going to their jobs during the day. The employment rate there is pretty good. Roughly and statistically - I'm not on the police payroll, so I don't know about this - it's been said that there are about 8 out of 55 neighborhoods in the city that are contributing to about 75% of the homicides, and I'm not in one of those neighborhoods. A couple of those neighborhoods are on the south side. A few more of them are on the far west side of Chicago. That's where most of the murders and shootings are happening, and it's all targeted and gang-related.

On a daily basis, I walk in and out of my house, and I walk up and down my block. I mean, I grew up outside of the city. I have a blond white mother who will walk around with a stroller and push my kids through the neighborhood. She's not fearful. Once you come here, you'll kind of see it too. I never worry about getting mugged, robbed, or anything like that. I mean, I do worry about it - you can't live in a big city like this and not worry about something like that - but it's not a constant fear that I have. This is coming from a white guy in a predominantly black neighborhood. When you hear stuff about shootings, people are like, "Oh, aren't you worried? 12 people got shot over the weekend. I think this last weekend was pretty bad. We had like 64 shootings, and I think it was 12 people that died two weekends ago. The majority of those are happening down, like, at the 111th block, and you're roughly at the 50th." I mean, the distance between somebody who is worried about crime in downtown Chicago when they live in, like, the far-north suburbs at the south side of Chicago is so big. Talking about crime like that is like talking about crime in another city and being worried that it's coming to your neighbor. So, there are shootings that happen in my neighborhood, obviously. That's why I'm on this podcast. There are shootings that happen in other parts of the city, but I'm more worried about my son hanging out at a friend's house whose parents have a gun. I would be more worried about them getting shot on the street.

Scott

Probably, in any large city with that many people, there are certain areas that you want to avoid - based on common sense - because that's where bad stuff happens.

Vincent

Yeah. There's a whole podcast about "Why is it just that area? Why these particular areas?" In some places, if you don't have any business there and if you walk around looking like a victim, there is a higher chance of you getting turned into a victim sometimes. For the most part, if you live in this neighborhood on the south side - there's a bunch of neighborhoods like that on the south side - it's been great because it allowed us, I think, to stay in the city and live in a bigger house. I mean, we can go out and do a lot around here. So, it's nice.

Scott

Alright. Well, let's talk about what happened that night if you can just kind of take us through that. I understand that there was a pretty bad storm happening. Is that right?

Vincent

Yeah. It was the end of June in Chicago. We just had my oldest son's 5th birthday party earlier that day. We were still, kind of, cleaning up the house. It was a cool night. It could have snowed if we were lucky. We had the windows open. There's a good breeze coming through nicely because there was a storm rolling in and it was coming from the north, from what I remember. So, we had closed the windows in the back of the house which is facing north, but the front windows which are facing south are still open because the rain was not even coming in - it was blown in the opposite direction - so, we had no problem. I think I was walking down the basement or the first floor when I heard this giant, like, "crack crack crack" noise. We have a tree that's out in our front yard. So, I thought that, maybe, the wind was really gusting and it had broken a branch which then fell down. I was like, "Well, my truck's parked underneath there. I'm gonna look out the window and make sure that my truck didn't get smashed." But there was no tree branch in the gutter laying on the street. However, there was a body of what I thought was a man laying on his back in essentially a giant puddle of water - as I said, it had been raining torrentially that night.

Scott

He was there by himself?

Vincent

Yeah, at the time, he was there by himself. I saw somebody else that was running across through a neighbor's yard. They had to hop on fences to get into the yard and to get out of the yard through the alley behind their house. They were yelling for help. They were saying, like, "My brother has been shot!" That helped me to piece together what was going on really quickly - he didn't get struck by lightning, he didn't get hit by a tree branch or a car. The person that I saw laying out there was shot. So, the first thing that I did was I went back to my closet, grabbed a weatherproof raincoat that I have - it has all sorts of pockets for photography stuff like a flashlight - and went out there barefooted. I mean, I was getting ready for bed. I was in some gym-like shorts and a T-shirt. I went out, started checking them out with a flashlight - what I found out later was that he is a 17-year-old kid - trying to talk to him, checking the pulse on his wrist and his neck, but I wasn't really getting anything

Scott

You didn't call 911?

Vincent

I didn't call 911. Actually, it was my wife who made the call. She saw what had happened. I went out and she made the call.

Scott

How did she realize what was going on? Did you tell her what you saw?

Vincent

She was right next to the window. She was in her bedroom, which had the windows open. When she heard it - the sound didn't echo throughout the house as it did for me - she immediately knew that it was gunshots. So, when I came up and talked about a tree branch, but she looked

at me, like, "What?! Are you dumb? Clearly, those are gunshots!" There was a body and I think she could see it out of the window where I was on. I was on the first floor, kind of, yelling down at her. I went out the door after I turned off the home alarm. She was making the call. She always had this recurring nightmare because whenever something bad is happening, she would call '911' but would just be put on hold or the phone just keeps ringing. I think she said that it rang up to, like, 19 times that night before she actually got through the 911 operator. So, she was like, "There's this body of a person out in front of our house. It's nighttime. I'm calling 911, but it's not going through." She really had to question whether or not this was really happening or if she was in a nightmare. It's a little bit surreal to her.

Scott

Okay, so you went outside and the rain was still pouring?

Vincent

Yeah. It's a downpour. I think the wind may have died down a little bit at that point, but how the weather was not really in my mind. I just knew it was wet and I needed a raincoat. As I said, I didn't even put shoes on. I was literally waiting on a one-way street. So, there's literally only enough room for one car to kind of go down at a time. There are cars parked on the left and right in that little parking area where the gutters and drains were full of ankle-deep water. I mean, there was that much water that night. It had been coming down for so long that it just built up. So, he was floating in the water for the most part - like his legs were a little bit out, but his back and head were kind of bobbing up and down a little bit in the water. He started to gasp for air right around the time when I was checking his pulse because he really wasn't moving. At that point, I'm like, "Okay, well, this guy's shot." I think my wife had grabbed some towels. She might have been looking for - because she's on medicine - one of those respirators which I forget what they're called, but it was for mouth-to-mouth. She was looking for some rubber gloves which I don't think she found either in the rush that night. It's not something that you'd expect on a daily basis.

Scott

So, she was thinking about what needed to be done. What were you doing at that time while you were there?

Vincent

Well, this is where my photojournalism instinct kind of kicks in. The first thing I thought when I walked outside my door and saw this body, there was this click that goes into my head where I'm like, "Oh, this is a crime scene. This is news. Do I grab my camera and start photographing this because this is news? This is my job. This is kind of what I do." I had a really great photojournalism teacher in college. His name was John H. White. He's a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist. He shoots for the Chicago Sun-Times and he's like, "Look, there's gonna be times in your career where you have to be human first, journalist second, and photographer third. If you're the only one there and somebody needs help, it's not your job to report on it or take pictures of it. It's your job to kind of help." I paused to think about that for, like, 0.5 seconds - because your brain works so quick and pretty fast - then, I made my way down the stairs, went out, immediately started checking for the pulse, grabbing his hand, and telling them, like, "Hey, the police are on their way. The ambulance is on the way. You just need to hang on there." At that point, the other guy that was with him came back with a female friend of theirs.

Scott

Okay. What was their involvement? You said at the beginning, someone said, "They shot my brother." Was this the brother?

Vincent

The name of the kid who was shot is Michael Patton. He was a foster child. So, the other guy that was there was not, I think, an actual blood brother - I don't know what the relationship was. I never knew anything about this kid before or after this incident. I never even knew the kid that was shot. He wasn't somebody that was familiar in the neighborhood. But, yeah, he came back. Whoever this kid was, he was also there with Michael when the shooting happened because he was the one who ran away, and then he was the one who came back. I don't remember about the girl. I just remember standing there, holding his hand, asking him to hold on, unzipping his shirt - he had, like, a fleece hoodie on or something like that - opening it up to, kind of, see where he was shot, and seeing if we could stop any bleeding. His friend kept walking back and forth. They're like, "They shot my brother!" He was almost in, like, a state of shock. I believe the kid was shot as well because he was grazed in the arm. He came up and one of the first things he did when he came back - which kind of upset me a little bit - is that he picked up some of the \$20 bills that were floating in the water next to them. Then, he was kind of going back and forth with, "They shot my brother!"

The one thing I regret was: while I was there holding his hand, there was a part of me that wanted to tell this kid, like, "Hey, this is your brother. You need to come down here and talk to him because he might not make it. He needs to hear your voice. You need to kind of say your piece, just in case this doesn't end the way we hope it does." I never kind of went up and said that to him. I just kind of stayed there and focused on the kid because there was clearly nobody else. At that point, I think some of the neighbors had started to come out and the rain had died down just a little bit. There started to be a crowd gathering.

Scott

Was your wife still on with 911? I mean, were they telling her to do CPR or anything?

Vincent

Yeah, she came out at that point. As I said, he was still breathing a little bit - gasping mostly. She'd come out with some towels, bandages, and stuff that we had. When I opened up his shirt, I saw he basically had a - the best way to describe it as - something that looked like a belly button. He had like a new belly button somewhere around the left side of his chest, if I'm correct. It was just like a fleshy white part of his skin that you can see where the bullet went in. This is something that always, kind of, haunted my wife a little bit. He was sitting there in that pool of water. If he had an exit wound on his back, every time he's gasping, there's a good possibility that he might have drowned before he actually died of anything else.

One kind of solace that my wife has but feels bad about is: that day, apparently, he also had a bullet wound to the head - the police report said there was one to the chest and one to the head. He had, kind of, medium-length tight curls on his hair. We looked at his head just to make sure that he wasn't shot there, but we never saw any kind of bullet wound up there. It was dark, everything was wet, which made everything even harder to see and the water washed away any kind of blood. There was literally no blood out there until the next morning when the sun came out. You could see where the body was laying from the night before because the water started to drain. Later in the evening, the ambulance came up about 4-5 minutes later.

Scott

Even if you would have seen an exit wound on his back, there's really no dry place to pull him or drag him to.

Vincent

Well, he was in a pool of water. I mean, he was, at least, on a good 3 inches of water. We could have dragged him up onto the grass or further out into the street. We had, maybe, 3-4 minutes out there with him before the paramedics showed up.

Scott

And you're not an EMT?

Vincent

No, I'm not an EMT. My wife's not an EMT either - she works in dermatology. She'd been really good at treating rash or psoriasis, but not bullet wounds. She worked as a nurse and trained in, like, an emergency room back when she was in college. At that point, I think it was maybe, like, a decade before.

Scott

From what you wrote about this, I seem to recall that, by the time the ambulance and the police got there, he had already died.

Vincent

Yeah, that was pretty much it. As I said, there was some time when I wasn't there because there were some other things that I was doing - I went back in the house at one point to get something else or tell my wife, like, "Hey, grab this." One of the first neighbors who showed up was in the apartment building right next to mine. I had already looked up when I went out there - probably about 30 seconds after I was out there. I was holding his hand, I was looking around because somebody just got shot. I'm not a cop. I've never been in the army, but I'm pretty well aware that the most dangerous place to be is right around where somebody just got shot because you never know if the guy that left comes back with a gun for retribution, right? The person who shot this kid came back to make sure that they did the job. So, I was looking around to make sure that I'm well protected.

Scott

Well, in EMT training, that's the first thing they tell you when you approach a scene. Your first question is, "Is the scene safe? If it's not safe, they're not going to go in. They're going to let the police go in first."

Vincent

My first thought was not "Is it safe?" My first thought was, "Do I take a picture?" My second thought was, like, "No. I got to help somebody." Somewhere along those lines, I was like, "Am I going to be okay out here?" I was the only one on the block and I was the first one out there. Like I said, his friend had left and it was just me and this kid in the rain.

Scott

Now, at some point in this scenario, you noticed a gun that's laying on the ground?

Vincent

Yes. I was about ready to get to that. The guy from the apartment came out. I was like, "Darrell, standover that gun. Nobody touches that gun!" He's a bigger guy - he was probably about 6 foot

and 220 pounds. I didn't know if it was the one that shot him. I didn't know what it was. Apparently, it was his gun and it jammed. He was a foster kid, grew up and graduated from high school in a pretty decent suburb of Chicago, relocated with a new foster parent, or something like that. Unfortunately, what happened was, I guess, for the last 6-12 months, he had been in and out of trouble. So, he had been out, apparently, sticking up the weed man. I don't know if you know what the weed man is, but that's the person who you call up to come and hand deliver your drugs to you now. You don't go to houses anymore to do it because they drive around in cars with, like, a small little amount so that if they do get pulled over, they won't do any serious jail time. So, they had been robbing this person or other weed men in the neighborhood. This time, he decided to do it, I guess, in the middle of a rainstorm when these people were ready for him. He tried to stick them up and somebody shot him from the back of what I believe was a minivan, based on the account of the friend that was there. That's how it went down. He basically tried to stick them up, they shot him, and he's dead now, unfortunately.

Scott

I didn't know any of that backstory when reading the news. It seemed like it was just a random drive-by, maybe gang-related retribution shooting, or something like that, but this was just over some Marijuana money.

Vincent

Pretty much. When I went out there, that kid was floating on the water, gasping for air, and there were a bunch of \$20 bills floating around them. So, he had either just decided to rob them or-- I'm not entirely sure how that all went down, but there was word on the street - from some of the neighbors that I heard - that he was trying to stick up the weed guy and the weed guy got him and almost got his friend too.

Scott

Of course, that's not the result of an official police investigation, so who knows if that's accurate or not.

Vincent

I will say that rumor is just speculation from the neighborhood. But I will also say the neighborhood is usually pretty spot on.

Scott

It's certainly a viable explanation.

Vincent

Yeah, it seems that they've been an accurate source on more than one occasion for the things that have happened.

Scott

The word on the street?

Vincent

Yeah, the word on the street.

Scott

Do you know anything about what happened afterward? Have you talked to anyone that was, maybe, directly involved as part of his family or anything?

Vincent

A couple of months after the article was written - it was on the front-page article on the Sun-Times - it got a little bit of attention. I had some people that would get in touch with me. I think a local alderman had written and emailed me about it. I had a woman who had done a book of poems about shooting victims in the city - she had gone around and talked to people who had known the victims before they were shot - and she published this book of poems. She had actually sent me a copy of the book because she had written one about Michael, based on the article that I wrote. The other thing that happened was: he had an aunt who I believe was from Ohio who got my number somehow. She might have gotten my email, and I gave her my number - I can't quite remember. We had a lengthy conversation. She wanted to know what exactly happened and what were his last moments like. She remembered him as a baby. I think it was her sister's child - I'm not entirely sure. It's a fuzzy conversation about what happened to his mother. It was her nephew, so she was really sad and just wanted to know what really happened and what it was like. She was very grateful to know that my wife and I were there when he passed. One thing I do want to say is: because I'm the journalist and I'm the one that writes the story, a lot of people forget my wife was there for a lot of this too - I was standing by his side and she was there for a lot of it too. It wasn't just me.

Scott

Alright. So the aunt had called you, mainly, for closure.

Vincent

Yes. I've got a couple of nieces and nephews too. I have a younger sister who got kids and I would be really devastated if one of them had passed. If my sister wasn't around to, kind of, take care of them, I would need that closure as well.

Scott

Right. Looking back on this, is there anything that you would have done differently?

Vincent

Not really. As I said, the only regret I really had is that I never told his friend that he needs to come down here because I could see that he wasn't going to pull through even if the ambulance got there in, like, the next 30 seconds. The bullet wound that I saw on his chest was close enough to his heart. I mean, he never closed his eyes. He was laying on his back and staring up when the rain was coming down. I don't think he blinked at all. I think I said somewhere in the article that it almost seemed like he was scared to close his eyes, but there's a possibility he never heard a word that I said. I mean, he could have been just barely functioning on, like, the body level at that point. So, what's left of your brain is taking over, trying to pull you through, and everything was just kind of instinct. The police report said that he was shot in the head too but I never saw that. He didn't have, like, a gaping bullet wound in his head and he seemed like he was still there.

Scott

Seeing something like this personally up close - you're a father, you have kids - has this changed your outlook on life in any way?

Vincent

I want to say 'yes', but I kind of had that outlook before. If you pay attention in life, there are too many people that have something bad happen to them. Some of them even said, "It was my

son's 5th birthday party at that point.” There are stories that I've heard that really stuck with me. There was a nanny daycare in the Chicago area that had a child who was crying and being really upset or whatever. I guess the daycare worker just got really fed up with him having little tantrums or whatever, picked him up, shook them, threw him down to the ground or something like that, then he stopped crying and started whimpering. I don't know if they got it from the video or from a personal account. When he picked up his favorite teddy bear, went over into his little sleeping area where they were supposed to lay down and go to bed, the child had died from some sort of brain crack or something that happened to his brain. So, every day, when my kids leave the house, I would act like they might not come back every time. That's kind of how I've always lived. So, this didn't change that too much, but it just really put it front and center. I've been around people who have died before, but I think this was definitely the first time that I was holding somebody's hand. I mean, it's not the first dead body I've seen, but it's the first time somebody has physically expired while I was standing next to them.

Scott

Yeah. I'm sure, probably later that night, after everything had died down, you really have to think, “Wow, what just happened?”

Vincent

I did. That's where the photos came in. I mean, that's part of how the story came about. I mean, it happened about 10.30 - 10.45 o'clock at night. I think, by 11.15 PM, the police showed up after we called 911. They started putting up the police tape and it was really surreal. I mean, I remember being in almost a numb state. I was very calm during it. I kind of got into, like, action mode when things started hitting the fan because it's just part of who I am. There was definitely some shock and awe of what it just happened - I wouldn't want to call it post-traumatic stress or anything like that - so, I reconciled with that by doing what I'm used to doing, which is picking up my camera, opening my front window, stepping out of my front porch, and taking pictures of a crime scene. I put myself back as a photojournalist instead of somebody who had just held the hand of a person who just died. I think the lens helped me put closure on that situation. If I had just been a normal person, I think it still might haunt me to this day. That camera put me on the other side of what I just went through - it's like an instant therapy, in a way.

Scott

I think we have to give credit to law enforcement officers because what is so traumatic for us is just another day at work for them, especially in a city with a large population where this kind of thing happens all the time.

Vincent

Yeah, it's hard. Because of unions and seniority, sometimes, police officers work night shifts first before they get the nice day shift when crimes don't happen more often. I think it's really hard to do after a while. It's a tough gig. I don't want to sit here and try to tell anybody how to do their job, that's for sure.

Scott

Yeah. Well, before we wrap it up here, as a photojournalist, you've got a project you're working on. I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about that.

Vincent

Yeah, sure. Besides going out and shooting news stories for the papers and magazines in the city, one of the things that I've been doing for over 23 years now is a documentary project where

I kind of get away from the city and out into rural America. I've been documenting, basically, about the abandoning of rural America - essentially, the population decline in small towns - specifically, farming and ranching areas and about this kind of mass exodus from a lot of these areas. It's called 'Lost Americana'.

It started off as just me taking pictures of, like, old abandoned barns because I thought they were pretty with the sunsets and the farm fields, but then the journalist in me kicked in and I started asking questions about why they were out there. The 'Lost Americana' project covers a lot of that. I've got a pretty regular Instagram feed and I've kind of written a blog on 'lostamericana.com' about some of the stuff I see and why this is happening. The biggest question is, "Is there a way to stop it from happening?" But the answer is sadly, possibly, 'No'. But yeah, that's kind of my side project - my baby.

Scott

So people can find that at the website: lostamericana.com.

Vincent

That's correct. You can find it in about any social media if you just type in '@lostamericana' or '/lostamericana' on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr - it all shows up there. I kind of try to make sure that I lock down the name so that nobody else steals it and starts something else with it.

Scott

Cool. All right. If someone wants to contact you, the best way they can get in touch with you is by going through that website?

Vincent

Yeah. LostAmericana.com.

Scott

All right, Vincent. What a traumatic thing to go through and to witness something like this. At least you were there and you were able to document it later on. Some of the pictures that you took of the scene, as well as the link to your project, will be on the show in the show notes when this goes live so that people can go there and see that. Thanks very much for sharing your story.

Vincent

Not a problem, Scott. Thanks for having me on. It was interesting to talk about again.

Scott

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Scott@whatwasthatlike.com, or just go to the website and click on 'Contact'. I'd love to hear what you think of this episode or a previous episode. Thanks again for listening and I'll see you on the next show where we'll once again ask the question, "What was that like?"