

## **Episode 93: Brook lost a leg to a shark**

Few things are scarier than being attacked by a shark.

Australian Mick Fanning was in a professional surfing competition, which was being broadcast live around the world. Viewers watched as a shark approached him and he was quickly rescued by nearby safety crews – the only damage was the leash that connected him to his surfboard had been chewed through.

In 1963, Rodney Fox was competing in a spearfishing tournament. A great white shark attacked and bit him around his midsection, puncturing his diaphragm, crushing his rib cage, and leaving many of his organs exposed. He survived with surgery and around 400 stitches.

One summer on the Jersey Shore, five shark attacks happened in 10 days, resulting in four deaths. That period is often thought to be the inspiration for the classic movie, Jaws.

As scary as it sounds, the reality is that shark attacks are quite rare. In fact, your odds of being attacked by a shark are around 1 in 11 million. Of course, that's not much comfort if you're one of the unlucky people to actually experience a violent attack by a shark.

Just ask Brook.

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### **Scott**

Do you have a favorite shark?

### **Brook**

I would say my favorite shark would be a whale shark. I've seen a lot of videos of people diving with them and they look really incredible and majestic. I'd put them up there.

### **Scott**

I've never heard of a whale shark, it sounds like it would be really big.

### **Brook**

Yes. But they are actually filter feeders, so they're catching little prey. They are a little safer to be around (laughter).

### **Scott**

You seem to be fairly intelligent about this species, and probably other species, and that's part of why you were in the Caribbean. So what were you doing down there, because you live in Texas?

### **Brook**

Yes. I'm originally born and raised in Texas. I was in the Caribbean though on the island of Saint Kitts and Nevis for schooling actually. I attend a veterinary school down there to obtain a doctorate in veterinary medicine. I was going into my 7th semester of didactic learning down there. We were just on our Christmas break around the time of my accident.

**Scott**

So you were part of a swim group, these are all people who were also studying in veterinary school?

**Brook**

Yes, different members of the community but usually all connected through our schooling. It could be students of others, students themselves, part of the faculty, or just other members of the community who all have a love of swimming. We all try to gather at the same time each week depending on schedules, just to get out in the ocean and swim for health and for fun.

**Scott**

For people who aren't familiar, Saint Kitts and Nevis are islands in the chain of islands in the Caribbean. On the west side of Saint Kitts is the Caribbean ocean and on the east side is the Atlantic ocean.

**Brook**

That's correct. It's really beautiful and at the ends of that island you can see where these two bodies of water meet, it's really cool. Yeah on the west side you have all that Caribbean sea there where it is beautiful, clear water, a lot more palm. On the east side is that Atlantic ocean where it is more choppy, a little cooler, but good for surfing.

**Scott**

Alright well let's talk about what happened that day. Your day, I understand, started around 8:45 a.m. when you got together with this group of people. How many people were in the group? Just take us through what happened.

**Brook**

We had a group of 7 meeting up to go on this fun end of break swim that we were building up to, as it was a longer distance than we usually swam. Unless we were in training mode for one of the longer length competition swims that they have on the island just for fun. We had to do a lot of planning because this wasn't a typical route for the club to do. Others as individuals have done them for fun, but this goes out to a little island that is not inhabited by people, it's small so it just has animals and great reefs around it. A really great place to just watch the local wildlife and just get out there and experience it without it being touched by humans.

**Scott**

Sounds like the perfect place for a field trip for a school of veterinary students.

**Brook**

Yes. We were all so excited to go out there. Some had been out before and we had friends who had been out before and described it to us. This was supposed to be a really fun trip, just something new and exciting to try and everyone would get to see something new. Also it was going to be a fun challenge because it was a more daunting distance. Because of that aspect we were stressing to others that if you weren't ready we were building up to it with shorter distances and working up to it; and if there was any doubt in their minds to play it safe. We had those that were actually in kayaks with us because they were still a little unsure and we wanted to make sure everyone would get there and come back fine, since we were swimming into open water and not necessarily following a shoreline this time. We were going to a new location and it was on the Atlantic ocean side, so it would be a different kind of swim we would be doing that day.

**Scott**

In talking about the distance we're talking about from where you started to the goal island was about a mile and a half; which is a long way to swim. I understand you had 3 swimmers and 4 kayakers.

**Brook**

Yes, that's correct. We had 3 persons, including myself, that were going to be in the water and we were swimming the whole distance. We had 4 persons that we had kayaks for and they were split up between two single kayaks and one double. This was a distance that all together it could've been more than 3 miles, because when you're swimming in the ocean you don't have a landline to follow so you can veer back and forth a little, we've seen some pretty funny tracking from watches. It promised to be at least 3 miles round trip total just depending on how off course we got.

**Scott**

You chose to swim out in the open water of the Atlantic, rather than in the more protected waters of the Caribbean. Why did you choose that route that day?

**Brook**

This island that we were reaching, it is more on the western side of Saint Kitts and Nevis, so to swim to it would be easier starting on the Atlantic side. There were some beaches that extended a little closer to it before the beach ran out and it was just cliff edges. On the eastern side the beaches were a little further back, so we would have to start swimming further back and then have to swim around to the Atlantic side. We would also have been fighting against that change in the waters where there is a lot of pick up in current and it's going to be a lot more choppy. It would exhaust us faster so we were starting on the Atlantic side for that reason. We also knew that we didn't want to do the swim at all if the Atlantic side was too rough, because it already had that reputation of being choppy and more churned up. So we were already watching out and keeping an eye on the weather. If the swells were going to be too big or it was going to be too windy we were going to just cancel it. Everyone was aware of this, that it was still kind of up in the air and that we would make the call that day when we got out there and saw it with our own eyes. We wanted to be able to say, "Ok it's not too bad. It looks like we'll be able to make it through and won't get completely exhausted just trying to get out past this pier."

**Scott**

Can you talk about what you were wearing for this swim?

**Brook**

For our usual swims, I go out in a sports bikini that ties on and I can tighten it, and I wear a rash guard with long sleeves. The sun down there is a whole other level. For this swim in particular we had swim buoys for all the swimmers in the water. These are just kind of big beans that you inflate so that they float above the water and follow you, they're attached to you usually around the waist. That way you can keep an eye on others. Usually we would have brightly colored caps and we told everyone not to wear blue so it would be easier to pick them out. The buoys are bigger and brighter so they help as well. Usually I wear my cap and goggles and my jewelry that I have on.

**Scott**

It seems like when you're swimming your head is mostly down facing the water. How do you keep track of going in the right direction?

**Brook**

That's a really good question. This is really something you have to figure out with open water swimming. It's not something you have to deal with when you're in a pool. What I learned to do myself, so I wouldn't hurt my neck over the duration, is when I wanted to look at my surroundings out of the water I would use that time to do a breaststroke instead of the freestyle where you are moving forward. With the breaststroke I'm able to really pick myself out of the water and I can scan 180 degrees so I can keep an eye on where I'm headed and where everyone else is. So I do those when I am wanting to look around out of the water.

**Scott**

Yeah it seems like if you weren't paying attention it would be pretty easy to get separated from the rest of the group if you're not keeping an eye on it.

**Brook**

Yeah it is very easy in the open water to just kind of veer off. We've certainly had a lot of stories like that. We have a couple swimmers that we joke about that it's their go to just to add a lot more distance and get more exercise. It's why my professor nicknamed me the sheepdog of the group because, I was typically at the back of the group for speed anyways, I would make sure to corral people in if they were drifting a little too far from the route.

**Scott**

That's kind of how this thing started right? You pop your head up and see that some other swimmers and kayaks have sort of gathered in one place and you started going their direction.

**Brook**

Yes. So we were, by my estimations, about a mile from shore where we started. Everyone was trying to stick to the east side of the island that we were headed to. Which was a good idea because that's the side we wanted to enter on, where the current was a little less weak. I was sticking a little more outside of that to make sure everyone did stay in that direction. There was one point where we were getting pretty close and you're thinking, "Oh I'll be there in the next 5 minutes. I'll be there in the next 5 minutes." Then you're thinking, "The island keeps getting bigger but I don't think that we're getting closer." I think people were wanting to kind of talk it out and just take a little break. I saw that the swimmers had gathered up with the kayakers when I was doing one of my scans. Since they were just a little to the right of me I was just going to change my direction a little bit to go directly towards them instead of on an intersecting path to meet up with them later. Since they were gathered then I just turned right to head towards them.

It was one, two strokes in when I felt the pressure on my leg just latch on. I knew I couldn't even bother kicking whatever was holding onto me, it was very strong and I wouldn't be able to kick there was just no way. You could just tell from the strength of the pressure. I did not think it was a shark at all. A shark was actually the furthest thing from my mind. Before I turned around I was literally thinking in my head, "Why would I feel pressure like this? Well the pressure feels as if something could be biting me, but there's no dogs in the ocean, I'm not giving shots right now. Nothing would want to bite me." Then my brain was thinking, "Can an octopus hold on this hard? Are they so strong that their grip could feel like this? Could it be the bite of something like a sea turtle? They are curious and they want to bite everything to see what it tastes like and if

they can eat it.” I honestly was surprised to turn around and see a shark. It was the biggest surprise. I had been scanning around me on the surface, I had been looking below me in the water, but I hadn’t been looking behind me, which is where I assume it came from. I was told afterwards that is where they do like to attack is either from below or behind so they can have an easier hunt, like a sneak attack. Especially on what they think is a wounded animal, which is what my swimming looks like apparently (laughter). That’s fine. The time that the shark held me it was an out of body surreal experience. I remember that I had to tell myself to do something, because I was thinking, “Oh wow this is so weird I’m watching this happen to someone. That must be what’s happening because this is so improbable to be happening to me. I must be watching someone else’s story unfold.” I had to tell myself, “If you don’t do anything, if you act like this isn’t happening right now, the story’s going to end. There’s not going to be any more story.” Even though it still felt like it wasn’t really happening, that it was almost like a dream, I had to be like, “Do something.” (laughter)

For most animal attacks you are going to go for sensitive areas and in my mind that was first, go for the muzzle area, the nose. Those are typically sensitive areas. When I turned around I tried to hit it with my right hand with a fist, in the nose. It just felt like nothing I’m sure. I don’t even think it registered because nothing changed, it didn’t seem like the shark cared at all or even noticed it. I could tell moving through the water, it didn’t have a lot of speed behind it anyway, and just all that resistance. That meant I had to change tactics because I was expecting that to work. I was like, “Oh no, now what? Now I’ve got to think of something else.” I had this huge eye in front of me, and I just jammed my thumb into its eye. That’s when it finally let go. It actually seemed to turn. It shook its head and swam away. Then I was able to get above water.

It still felt surreal even at that point I think. Until I looked down at my leg just to survey what had happened. I saw, the best way to say it is just shredded, it just looked like shredded chicken thigh. It was not recognizable as a leg anymore. That set me back into the real world. I immediately thought, “Ok this is a problem.” So I’m yelling out, “Shark! Shark! Help me! Help me!” Then just trying to tread water, because as I’m yelling I just feel the energy draining out of me. I already felt like I was losing air, and it was a lot harder just to yell out, “Help me!” It ended up dying out to just a whisper. Thankfully, though, my friends were close and they reached me so fast it seemed like seconds. It was actually my friend that was in a kayak who, upon hearing me crying about a shark, jumped into the water to save me. That was Samantha.

### **Scott**

Samantha the hero. One of the heroes in this story anyway.

### **Brook**

Yes. Everybody there, I would not be here without them. I completely owe my life to them. Everyone wants to talk to me about the experience, because I got bit by the shark but it was only a couple of seconds of it. Only a couple of seconds out of this long- well seeming to me - long time period.

### **Scott**

When this happened how far were you from the group?

### **Brook**

Just going off of my estimation it looked like they were just 20 feet away. I could see them pretty well; they weren’t super far away, but it wouldn’t have been easy for me to just swim over and catch up to them really quickly. They said it looked like our professor was already swimming

toward me before he even heard the rest of the story either, he was just already swimming. They weren't sure he heard me yell shark, but he was on his way over to help. It seemed like they reached me about the same time. Samantha, since she was in a kayak, she had a life jacket on, so she had taken her life jacket off when she reached me to put it around me. Like I said, I was just losing energy and air so quickly, I was so exhausted. She put the life jacket around me just to help me stay afloat. Once they had gotten the kayak over to me that he was now in, my professor, he had grabbed my wrist, and she was holding me by my waist; then they pulled me onto the kayak. Just pulled me across the front of it so I was out of the water a little bit more; my head at least. It's a kayak, it's not very big, so we couldn't get all of me out of the water. It at least helped me so there wasn't the struggle of me staying a float and there wasn't risk of me falling under the water. So I could keep my head up and still breathe, but it was very difficult at that time. No breath was satisfying enough. I was not able to get enough oxygen and my body was just constantly screaming at me for it.

During this time I could hear them talking about things, people yelling out different commands; what they were going to do and what other people should do. We had 2 cell phones with reception to call out. We were very lucky that we were still able to get reception out in the water, but we weren't very far. It was still very lucky. We had one cell phone that the girls were calling the emergency response teams with. Police department to start with then trying to get connected with the Coast Guard, to have someone come out and get us. It was still a tricky area to get to the shore, it was a mile away and what was close to us was just the rocky cliffside, which wasn't a safe place to get out. This island that we're getting to that we were pretty close to, there was still a current that was pretty strong to fight against. Now we have 4 people on a kayak weighing it down, so we tried making our way there. He was really trying, but it was just a lot of weight on the kayak. We were just able to stay in the same spot so we were easy to find and so if we weren't moving around they would be able to find us well enough.

While I'm laid across this kayak, I'm really just laying there trying to breathe, I couldn't even really keep my eyes open. I had my professor that was on one side of the kayak holding onto my wrist, making sure I don't slip back in the other way. Then I have Samantha, she was behind me trying to support me up and hold me onto the kayak so I'm not slipping back in, she actually had to get my swim buoy off from around my waist. They actually thought of using that as a tourniquet. With that waistband she was able to put that around my thigh and just crank it on as tight as possible to work as a tourniquet. I had already lost so much blood initially, and while it's hard to see in the ocean after it's just kind of trailing out because it diffuses so fast, we knew there was still blood loss. So she got that tourniquet on and she did it perfectly and that's honestly why I'm still here, their quick thinking and actions.

### **Scott**

Was there any concern about, you know when you use that much blood, sharks smell blood from a long ways away. Were there other sharks around or did that initial attacking shark leave the area, or was he still there?

### **Brook**

I was so afraid of what else would come around because of the blood. When that shark had let go of me and I got up to the surface, it just billowed up around me. It looked like one of those movies, it really did seem like a movie and that was what made it so surreal too while that was

still happening. As quickly as it was there it was gone. Samantha told me later-- everyone told their sides of the story and pieced together the different things that we didn't realize were happening at the time until we talked to the others. She said she saw it and by the next wave it was gone. That amount of blood, to be gone that quickly, I was very afraid of how far it was spreading and what it was attracting. Luckily we only had the one shark to contend with. I thought that I injured it enough that it wasn't going to come back, the eye is very sensitive, and I saw it swim away. I was told later -I was too incapacitated to realize this- while we were in the water and I was already across the kayak, the tiger shark did come back. It was circling the group. We were all together at this time so it was circling around the group and they were aware of it. It was going right under the kayaks, the girls were able to see it right there. They're so smart, these beautiful amazing people, they were turning the kayak to keep in between me and the shark. Obviously I would be the easiest to pick off and I'm attracting it. They just knew, "We're going to keep turning this kayak, whichever direction we need to so we have the full length of it between it and me." They were doing that for, they said, 10 minutes before it gave up and swam away. I think we are incredibly lucky that was the only one that came around at that time. I know they are territorial so maybe that's what gave us the luck that nobody else wanted to go up against this shark in its own territory. I don't know exactly, but I'm surprised nothing else came around.

### **Scott**

I'm picturing this, right now you've got 4 people on this kayak, the kayak is too weighted down to make any forward progress. That's got to be pretty discouraging like, 'How are we ever going to get out of this mess?'

### **Brook**

I could hear the fear in their voices. Talking about what the options were, what was happening and what wasn't happening. Key is so strong, she is so strong, and I know she was trying her hardest; but she was saying that it didn't seem like we were making any forward progress. She wasn't sure we were going to be able to get to the island to get out of the water there. Our goal was just to get out of the water and get blood out of the water. There were 4 adults on one kayak and this petite little girl, I mean she's pure muscle, but it was so difficult. Then later in the day we got the wind picked up so the waves did pick up a little bit; especially getting around this island where all the currents are converging. It was a very very difficult task for anyone, without the weight of 3 extra adults on a kayak.

I at the time did not realize how much time had passed. I was just concentrating on getting air and staying conscious. I was setting goals for myself to hold on and be able to communicate to others if I was asked questions by emergency personnel. I wanted to be able to tell them my blood type, and answer any medical questions. While I was just laying there, I had my eyes closed maybe 90 percent of the time just trying to breathe, I think it's only been like 10 minutes and everyone was set in their routine now of calling or trying to cheer the others on and encourage them to keep going. I hear Samantha say that she thinks that she is getting a little tired and starting to cramp up and she's not sure how much longer she will be able to support me on this boat. So our professor was just being really encouraging, saying, "It won't be much longer, she'll be fine." He's got me. Then just a minute later he says, "Oh no. I think I'm starting to cramp up too." We were already against the ropes to begin with, but it of course was not good to hear these words right now. Of course nobody wants to stop, nobody wants to give up. Thankfully those were just the magic words I think because just a minute later we heard the hum of the boats. It just took a few more minutes and they were there.

One of our usual swimmers with us is our professor's wife, Catholine, she didn't join us that day in the swim. She did wait on the beach for a little bit just to watch us as long as she could and she was going to hang around that area just in case there were any phone calls that were made. She was one of the other persons that was called right away so that she could also call people as she knows plenty of people to get the phone tree rolling.

**Scott**

Were you feeling pain from your leg during this time?

**Brook**

I'm very thankful to adrenaline that I did not feel pain. It's weird to describe. It was just that I was aware that my leg was there, but I couldn't feel everything or else I would have been feeling the pain. It really just felt like a floating entity, and I was just aware of it kind of swaying in the current. I knew it was there but I didn't feel the pain. I'm very fortunate for that. The few times I was moved to the boat or into stretchers or gurneys, things like those jostling movements, I think because I had broken bones in my legs, those movements were enough to break through the adrenaline. I felt that pain. That was the worst pain I've felt in my life. It did have me cry out. Luckily I only felt that in those breakout moments when I was being moved. I'm honestly surprised it lasted as long as it did, but very lucky that I didn't have to feel it the whole time. I didn't even know until I woke up the next day that I'd injured my hand. I was talking to Key about it later and I said, "Yeah I had no idea my hand was also bleeding, so that was more blood in the water." She said, "Oh yeah I could see it. But that was the least of your problems so it was fine." I was like, "Fair point." (laughter). I'd had no idea I hurt my hand at first, it was honestly the biggest mystery for us we were like, "How? How did that happen?" It was actually only through doing these interviews and talking with an actual shark expert, that he told me, "Well that's why you're not supposed to punch them in the nose is because you are likely to have your hand end up in their mouth and those teeth are gonna get you."

**Scott**

Was the rescue boat big enough to hold everybody?

**Brook**

I'm not entirely sure about how big the boat was. I just kind of knew from what I'd seen of boats we had used before for our swims, that the Coast Guard has for just maintaining order in the water. I hadn't really opened my eyes much at all so--

**Scott**

I understand in your condition you're not doing a headcount making sure everybody is ok right? (laughter)

**Brook**

Yeah. So I just kind of assumed I knew which boat they used but actually when they first arrived I was the only one that was taken initially, to get me to the hospital quickly. It was another one of the Coast Guard boats that picked up everyone else, after they got me out of there. Their plan was literally to just grab me, go and get me to the hospital. How it worked out was, we were actually closer to Nevis even though in the water we were still right by the tail end of Saint Kitts. This is still down at the peninsula end where the buildings are personal housing, or maybe some bars and grills. The hospital they have on Saint Kitts would be all the way around the peninsula

and down to the main body of the island, so it's actually farther away to travel back there. So they took me to Nevis and took me to the hospital there.

The only part of the journey that I lost consciousness for was the transportation to the hospital. When I woke up at the hospital, I was in a gurney and they were trying to wheel me through and get me through the hallways into the inside. Everyone was trying to find veins to put IV's in me. This is when I was asking for oxygen because now I had all this medical personnel around me in the hospital, so I was calling out for an oxygen tank. Once they got me to this room they were able to get an oxygen mask on me and it made such a huge difference. It was so painful to breathe before and that helped so much.

**Scott**

They took you into surgery pretty quickly right? I mean obviously this is a medical emergency. Were they talking about saving your leg at that point?

**Brook**

There was a lot of moving around and a lot of talking. I could catch certain phrases here and there. I was mostly hearing the nurses at first talking about IV's and what medications to start. I was trying to call out where I could to answer questions. I do, at one point, hear a male voice and I hear him saying, "The bones are broken and we are going to need to go in for surgery" and he was giving instructions to others. So this oxygen mask that I had on me was switched out for a different mask, and that's when I smelled the anesthetic. That's when I knew, "Ok I'm going under for surgery now. Now is when they are really going to start digging into things." They were cutting off my clothing. One of the last words I heard was the same male voice, and I heard the word, "amputate." Well I knew he was talking about me, and I saw my own leg and it was a complete mess. I was still like, "Ugh. Dang. Do we have to?" Of course, whatever the doctor says goes.

**Scott**

How do you prepare yourself for that? Obviously you were about to be put under and not really know what was going on, but that was kind of your last thought before you got put to sleep right?

**Brook**

Yes, it was one of the last things I had heard before the anesthesia took me under. Yeah I don't know why I thought that my leg would be ok, I saw how shredded it was. We were in the water for so long. There was so much blood loss, but I heard the word "amputate" and I thought, "Aw dang it. Do we have to?" I knew, though, "Yeah it is that bad. You already knew this. You saw it so that is the logical route to follow is yeah there is going to be an amputation." I didn't have too long to think about it, the anesthesia gas was already on me so it was only a couple of seconds before I was under. I wasn't afraid. I was ok with it because I thought, "Yeah that's a medical term. That's a thing that is done, that's a totally plausible route. It's normal, it happens." So I wasn't too afraid because I knew that it tracked logically. I was still aware that it was still the most likely option when I was waking up from anesthesia, but I didn't want to confirm it until I was completely conscious and aware and able to deal with it. They had the same thoughts as well, they didn't want anybody to tell me if I didn't already know and until I was fully awakened and out of that kind of state that you are in afterwards. So they were given instructions, "Hey don't talk to her about it. We need to talk to her but we want to make sure that she's in a more awake state." So when my friends came in afterwards, they were just talking and gabbing, but I had it in the back of my head but I know I also didn't want to confirm until I could really process

it. You have these phantom sensations like, “Yeah I can still feel my toes. It still feels like things are there.” I didn’t want to look down and really lift up the bed sheet to check until it was a better time.

It was the next morning when I was waking up. I was a little worried to check because I could still feel my toes. So I thought, “Well maybe there is a chance that it’s still there. It would be pretty wild if it were still there and you were just feeling your toes and no pain or anything. Plus I had heard the word amputate so it would be pretty far-fetched if it was still there.” I was kind of taking it slow to reveal it to myself even. I didn’t want to just rip the bedsheets back and see something completely jarring. I honestly just looked at the bedsheets and said, “Oh ok, I can follow my right leg down there and that’s where the sheets are popped up a little bit because my toes are sticking up. If I just look to the left of that the sheets are completely flat until you get up near my knee around my thigh area.” I actually didn’t even really look at my leg, I don’t even think that whole first day, until a nurse came to look at it. I was also kind of scared to check too, so I just wanted to do it in a way that would confirm it but not be so--

**Scott**

Not so shocking.

**Brook**

Not so shocking, yes.

**Scott**

You didn’t stay in that hospital very long right? Weren’t you flown to Texas shortly after that?

**Brook**

Yeah, so there was a bit of travel involved. The hospital that I was taken to was on Nevis, that’s where I had my surgery and treatment. That evening they transferred me to the hospital on Saint Kitts, to stay there in their care overnight because they had an ICU department and nurses there around the clock. So I was taken on an ambulance and across the ferry in the ambulance to Saint Kitts. Stayed in that hospital for the night and the next morning and was able to have visitors, but just one at a time. This was still during Covid restrictions so they had their own mandates in place. It also may have been a restriction just for patients in the ICU as well just so there’s not too much happening with them when they are going through a lot. So I stayed there in Saint Kitts for just the next day and while we were waiting on plans to solidify to get me back to the states for further treatment and follow-up. It was that afternoon the next day, I was being boarded onto a medical flight, a private jet. It’s an actual company that has trained paramedics and EMTs accompany you on this plane to whatever hospital you’re going to. The whole crew was amazing, they were so sweet and so funny on this really tragic plane flight out of this paradise island. Typically, just because of where it is located, most flights would go to Miami for their hospitals there. Since I’m from the Houston area and that’s where my family is, it just made more sense just to add on the little extra time to take me to Houston so I could receive treatment there.

I stayed in in-patient rehabilitation for just a few weeks. Once I was released back to stay in family’s homes, then my real limitation was as an outpatient. I would travel to one of their sites to go for appointments where I actually got to first get into the pool there. While I was still staying at the inpatient facility, my incision line hadn’t healed up enough for me to get in the water, so we were still waiting on that to close up completely. It was actually a while until I was able to get back in the water. I really wanted to try, I just missed the water I always swam. I

didn't think there would be any problems with just getting into a pool. I was pretty sure there would be a problem going back to beaches so I knew I was going to work up to that, but I was not expecting a pool to be a problem. Especially one that was just a little square, it had stairs, lifts, platforms, all the safety devices in the world around it and in it; because it's for those that are recuperating. It's the safest amount of water, just a step above a puddle, that I could be in. My first time getting in I broke down, I did. My physical therapist had to turn into my mental health professional, but she's been amazing. What made it harder was the fact that I was caught off guard and that it did affect me as much as it did, because I wasn't expecting that to happen in a pool. I thought, "Yeah of course it makes sense if that were to happen in the ocean." I was just thinking I was going to get in the pool here and see how I could swim now. For it to catch me off guard like that, it really scared me. I thought, "Well if I can't even do this here, is there any hope of me getting back into the ocean again? Will I even be able to just sit on a beach again?" It was really hard but ultimately it was very helpful too. It turned out to be a cathartic experience. I had to actually confront those feelings that I was glossing over and thinking, "I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm healing up. I'm progressing in physical therapy. My body is healing, then that means that I'm ok. That's the only thing that's been affected is just my physical being. Nothing else is wrong. I just need to learn to walk again and that's it." Of course, that was definitely not the case so this excursion into the pool was the first instance of me confronting and dealing with what had happened.

**Scott**

I would have thought that the medical professionals, having dealt with a case like yours at some point in the past, or in their training they would have been instructed to kind of warn you ahead of time. To say, "You know, you're getting back in the water. The water is where this bad thing happened so kind of be prepared for the unexpected." They didn't give you any heads up like that at all?

**Brook**

I think because I was so vocal about wanting to get in the water and I was so sure about it. I was misleading them. Ultimately it is the patient that makes the decisions, if I say I want to do this then they're going to go along with it, if I say I don't want to do it then they're not going to do it. I think because I felt so confident in it then they were ok with it. I know they did have trepidations because when I did talk about it they had someone from the psychologist department talk to me about if I was to get back in the water what did I think it would be like? How soon and what kind of water. So they did kind of talk to me a little about it before, but I just kind of pushed for it so they were open to it. All my therapists have been so great and wonderful. I know that they were still looking out for me but these events are so rare. One of my therapists was actually so surprised to find out there was actually a code for it in their database system when putting in their notes and things. I don't know that they had actually met another shark attack survivor.

**Scott**

It's true. It is pretty rare.

**Brook**

I think it was kind of a learning experience for all of us.

**Scott**

I love seeing how you dealt with this. As part of your recovery you kind of have a sense of dark humor, because I've seen pictures- I saw you write one time, you had to be careful with Covid,

because you were on your last leg haha. You've got T-shirts that say things like "Hello Chum" and "Bite me" stuff like that, is that kind of how you deal with trauma in general?

**Brook**

My therapist would say yes (laughter). Yes I've always kind of had comedy in my back pocket. I never really thought of it as a coping mechanism honestly until maybe the last few years. Definitely more so now. Seeing other amputees and shark attack survivors, they are aware they say, "Yeah we know that we're making jokes about it but, heck that's what helps me." We kind of do get a lot of guff from family members usually because it's hard for them to hear something that was so hard for them to process themselves, and they can only process from a distance. Then to see the person that it actually happened to make a joke about and make it sound so trivial and they're like, "I almost lost you, how can you make a joke about that?" So I do understand, I know it's really hard for my boyfriend. He is barely making jokes about it. Whenever I make jokes he's just like, "I can't believe you said that." So many people in these communities agree that it's really what gets you through so much of it, because if you can't laugh at it what else are you supposed to do? It is a part of the human process. It might not be everyone's process, and that's fine, it's just kind of where I was situated and it's just helped me from there.

**Scott**

Your sister Paige has been a big help in your recovery, she's kind of another hero in this story too.

**Brook**

Yes, but I want to tell a funny story about her first. When all these phone calls were first being made out, there was of course minimal information so my family was just getting a burst of phone calls saying, "Brook's been attacked by a shark. She's in the hospital, we'll tell you more later." That's it. So I had family members calling around spreading the news of, "Be aware information is coming through. Have phones ready." When Paige found out she heard, "Shark bit, taken to hospital" she thought, "Oh she just got grabbed, needs a couple stitches and she'll be out later so she wanted to be presentable for when we FaceTimed later or talked on the phone or talked however we did. So she got out this T-shirt she had from elementary school with a shark on it and she wanted to wear that for the first time that she spoke to me afterward about this. Then later when more information came in, they said, "Hey she's in the hospital because she has to get her leg amputated." She was like, "Oh. My. Gosh. I can't believe I even thought about wearing this! I'm going to burn this shirt." Just like so freaked out about it. I think everyone else too cause you hear shark attack you think, "Oh yeah, what? That doesn't happen. I'm sure she's fine." Then not realizing the severity of the situation until later so then they were like, "Oh no, I can't believe I cracked a joke now." I told everyone, "Hey I was making jokes right out of anesthesia. You can throw anything at me, I've probably already heard it or thought it up myself, but I will still enjoy it." Paige knows me though, she was worried afterwards but then knew later that I was making jokes about it, so when I arrived in Houston I didn't have anything but one bag Samantha had put together for me of things she collected from my apartment. So I didn't have a lot of winter gear or anything so Paige had a bag for me of clothes and items for me to have while I was staying in the hospital and rehab, and she included that shark T-shirt. That's the shirt I wore to my therapy sessions and my therapist were like, "You're going to have people worried about you. You might get a visit later today. Not a lot of people know your story but we know and some might be worried about you" (laughter)

**Scott**

“This girl’s in complete denial. She needs help.” Are you walking again now?

**Brook**

Yes I am. I don’t know, the doctors said I was young and healthy, I don’t know where they got that from. I have had a pretty good recovery so far and in rehab we were just working on building back muscle that I had lost from just being out of commission. Just worked on being able to function in my limited capacity until that was able to be rectified. Not everyone can get a prosthesis right away and you don’t know how long it’s going to take. You also just have to learn how to use it anyway, so it first just started with just building up different muscles that wouldn’t really be used much before but would be now. I was in a wheelchair to start with and was able to use a walker and crutches, but I do have a prosthesis now and I’m able to walk with it. I’m at the point now where I do not need any assisting devices while I’m using it. I can use my hands now, and get around pretty well. I wasn’t very graceful to start with before the accident, so I do stumble here and there but that’s nobody’s fault but my own. I can’t dance just yet, but I couldn’t do that before so that’s not too much of a worry. It’s becoming more normal and natural. I do feel more confident now so I can get around, it’s just about building up my stamina and strength and practicing whatever obstacles I come across in different terrains. I do have plans to return to Saint Kitts and finish schooling there. I had just one semester of didactic learning to finish there before I would move stateside to do clinical rotations through another teaching hospital. I really want to return and finish up what I can at school in Saint Kitts. I know the island. I love it there. I know the faculty and administration there.

**Scott**

They’re going to be pretty excited to see you come back too.

**Brook**

I’d like to think so. Yeah they are. I’ve had some wonderful people reaching out to me and checking in on me. People that I would’ve considered friends before this. Yeah, just the support that I’ve gotten from the school has been amazing. I do want to return there to finish up my didactic learning there and we are trying to get me back so I can start classes in this upcoming spring semester. Which will start in January. So I would be back a year after the accident.

**Scott**

Right, so you’d be going back January 2022. This literally just happened- as we record this in the fall of 2021- this happened in January of this year. I think that’s a pretty good recovery.

**Brook**

Yeah, I might have been a little over confident before though, and I was thinking, “Oh I could be back next semester. Modern medicine is amazing, look how fast I am healing.” Then I hit my roadblock and I thought, “You know there’s other things to this healing process.” I was trying to go back earlier. I was trying to go back in the summer. Then I was thinking, “Ok well summer didn’t work out so maybe the fall.” Then the world is still burning with the pandemic, also there is always some requirement to be made. Now that I’ve progressed and given myself more time I am seeing like, “You know what? It’s ok to take more time to heal. Especially when you need it.” I do feel confident about going back in the spring and think I will be ready for that journey then.

**Scott**

Well I know this whole thing has been, obviously, very expensive. One of the things your sister Paige did early on is to set up a GoFundMe. I know a lot of people have contributed to that already, but I know the expenses are ongoing as well. We’ll have a link to your GoFundMe page

in the show notes for this episode. So if anyone feels like they would like to contribute to that, everyone is welcome to do so. One final question, are you planning to go swim in the ocean again?

### **Brook**

I am planning on it. I'm also planning to take a stuffed animal that I can hold on to and a couple friends to talk to, because now I know it's not as easy as it once was. I've seen how strong everyone else is. They've gotten back in the water after seeing something so horrific and they push me to be better and do better. So I want to get back out in the water. I'm saying, I WILL get back out to the water, out into the ocean. I have a lot of support behind me to do that. I wanna actually try to go learn to scuba dive still. I know it might take a little bit longer though this time.

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You can see pictures of Brook, along with some of her dark humor t-shirts, at [WhatWasThatLike.com/93](http://WhatWasThatLike.com/93).

I wanted to let you know, there are a couple of places you can find the podcast that you might not know about.

First, there is actually a What Was That Like YouTube channel that has every episode. No, you won't see any videos of me interviewing the guests. I'm not Joe Rogan. But you can listen to them there if you want to. And if you go there and just click the Videos tab, it's kind of cool to see the graphic image for each episode there, all on one page. That's at [WhatWasThatLike.com/youtube](http://WhatWasThatLike.com/youtube).

And the other place is Reddit. Lots and lots of people are on Reddit, and if you've never discovered it, it's a pretty amazing place for user-submitted content. And if you're not careful, you might suddenly realize it's 3 in the morning and you're still scrolling through and reading things. The What Was That Like subreddit is at [reddit.com/r/whatwasthatlike](http://reddit.com/r/whatwasthatlike).

And we close out this episode with a segment that's become pretty popular – the Listener Story. If you have a story that you think people might find interesting, drop me an email and tell me about it – [Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com](mailto:Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com).

Stay safe, and I'll see you next time.

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### **Caller**

Back in 2015 I was 16 years old and on a weekend my dad decided to take me, as a treat, to go see the new Terminator movie. Everything was fine until about halfway through after a pretty big car chase scene. At the beginning of this scene there was a jump scare, and we didn't know it at the time, but this had actually caused an elderly woman in the audience to have a heart attack. When this happened, the lights in the theater came on and the movie paused. This caused everybody kind of to stop, we only had a second to realize what was happening before we heard her husband start yelling for help. He said that she wasn't responding, she had just sat there and stopped moving. He said that she gripped his hand really hard and then just lost consciousness. My dad was the only one in the theater that actually had CPR experience, so he went down there and helped her husband take her and carry her to the bottom row of the chairs. Once they did this, my dad just started going to work. He started doing chest compressions, he started doing mouth to mouth, and while he was doing this we realized that he still wasn't

responding. My dad actually got me to go out and get the attendants to re-call the ambulance and get a proper ETA on how long it would be for them to get out to us. While this was happening my dad was still back in the theater doing mouth to mouth and chest compressions. Later he told me he was doing them so forcefully he could actually feel her ribs crack, which is actually a pretty normal thing to happen in CPR. She still wasn't responding after a certain amount of time and we noticed she had actually urinated herself and she had very glassy eyes. My dad was pretty sure at that point that we had lost her. At this point the ambulance showed up and I was able to direct the people to the theater where my dad was still working on her. They were able to go to work, they had a whole machine that did chest compressions for us. We were only there for a little bit longer before they took her out on a gurney. The last thing my dad did was give his business card to the husband and told him to call us when she recovered, but we never got that call. So we are pretty sure she passed away that day, and it was a very unfortunate event.

The scariest thing though, to me, is that no one else in the theater did anything at all. That is something that I think could easily be fixed if people just took the time to educate themselves and took the time to take a simple CPR class. If it had been my dad that day that actually had the heart attack, he would probably be dead because there was no one else who knew anything besides him. I just say, educate yourselves and be sure to have a little bit of medical knowledge so in instances like that, if it is your loved one, you can do the things you need to do to help give them a fighting chance.