

## **Episode 23: Whitney was shot 12 times**

Sometimes great ideas show up in your brain at the most surprising times.

One morning last September, Whitney Austin suddenly had the idea that she was going to do something. She was going to take action and do everything in her power to reduce gun violence. And let me tell you, Whitney is a very determined person. When she decides to do something, it's gonna happen. Since that day, she has started a non-profit organization, along with several of her colleagues, with the purpose of reducing ALL gun violence in a way that everyone can accept.

And what prompted her to have that great idea? Well, when she first thought of it, she was at the Fifth Third Bank building in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she worked. She remembers this very specifically, because she was inside the revolving door, the main entrance to the building. She was slumped on the floor, inside that revolving door. And she was bleeding, because she had just been shot 12 times.

That morning, as she entered the building, she had unknowingly walked into a mass shooting that was happening right there in the lobby. And as she lay there, pretending to be dead, with literally a dozen bullet wounds in her body, she thought about her husband and her two young children, and she also thought, "If I live through this, I have to do something to stop this from happening again."

I love talking with people who don't just talk about problems, they take action. That's Whitney. In the show notes for today's episode, I'll have links to her organization, called Whitney/Strong, for anyone that wants to help in this cause. That's at [whatwasthatlike.com/23](http://whatwasthatlike.com/23)

And just before my conversation with Whitney, you'll hear about 5 minutes of the police radio communication that happened that morning, in order to kind of set the scene for Whitney's story. I'll be back afterward to wrap things up.

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### **Scott**

Hey, this is Scott. I'll tell you upfront that you're gonna love today's conversation with Whitney. I also want to let you know that if you want to support the show, I've started a Patreon. Hang around right after today's episode and I'll tell you how you can support this show for as little as \$1/month.

### **911 Operator**

911. How can I help?

### **Man**

People are running up to me and saying that there is a shooter at Fifth Third.

### **911 Operator**

Copy. Do you have that address?

### **Man**

The first floor of the Fifth Third - that's what I was told.

### **911 Operator**

Copy. There's still an active shooter that's still inside of the building.

**Police**

Have they left the building? Any information?

**911 Operator**

The only information is the first floor of the Fifth Third building - no further at this time.

**Police**

Apparently, there is one guy down who got shot.

**911 Operator**

Copy. One down.

**Police**

No suspect yet. Shots fired.

**911 Operator**

Copy. More shots are fired in the building.

**Man**

They're coming out at the front!

**911 Operator**

Copy. Subject is coming out at the front.

**Police**

Suspect down inside the building.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Suspect down inside the building.

**Police**

Make sure that we don't have any other shooters.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Make sure that we don't have any other shooters.

**Police**

Get fire here. We got at least 2 down.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Fire's responding. Two down.

**Fire**

I'm on it.

**911 Operator**

Do we have shots fired by the police?

**Police**

We have shots fired by the police.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Shots fired by the police.

**Police**

I got another one. All officers okay.

**911 Operator**

Copy. All officers okay. Any units on scene?

**Police**

Get fire here now!

**911 Operator**

Copy. Fire's responding. Any officer down?

**Police**

One at Fifth & Walnut.

**911 Operator**

Copy. One at Fifth & Walnut.

**Police**

We need fire immediately.

**911 Operator**

Copy. One at Fifth & Walnut. Where is the other victim?

**Police**

At Graeter's.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Victims at Graeter's.

**Police**

We also have victims inside the Fifth Third building.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Victims are also inside.

**Police**

There are 2 victims inside the bank.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Two inside the banks. Fire's not responding until the scene is secure. All units advise.

**Police**

It's secure. Get fire in here.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Fire is coming.

**Police**

Where is the shooter located at?

**Police**

The shooter has been shot. We're in the lobby of the bank on the fountain's side. I have not cleared any further.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Shooter is in custody in the lobby of the bank. Subject has been shot.

**Police**

Apparently, we got some victims on the loading dock of the Fifth Third building.

**Police**

I need fire in front of Graeter's. I have one female victim here. I'm attempting to apply a tourniquet now.

**911 Operator**

Copy. One victim in front of Graeter's.

**Police**

I've got at least 3 down inside the lobby of Fifth Third. It's secure. Get fire in here now.

**911 Operator**

Copy. Fire's responding.

**Police**

There is at least one critical at the loading dock.

**911 Operator**

Copy. One critical on the loading dock.

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**Scott**

The morning this happened, you faced death. Yet, you lived to see your husband and your children again. Have you made any sense of that yet?

**Whitney**

No. I don't think that - while I am alive on this earth - I will ever make sense of it. Someday, when I get to heaven, I will ask God, "Why did this happen? Why was I given the opportunity to live and others were not?" It's very hard to reconcile. There's often a sense of guilt quite. I'll get my answer someday, but I don't think that I will get them while living on this earth. What I tried to

do is to not spend any energy to figure it out - because I won't get those answers - but to spend all of my energy on being grateful and use that gratitude to drive me to take action to prevent gun violence.

**Scott**

Sounds like a good strategy. That'll be a good question for the afterlife.

**Whitney**

Yeah, for sure.

**Scott**

Let's talk a little bit about what led up to what happened. This happened at the Fifth Third Bank. When I say 'Fifth Third Bank', this is actually their headquarters, right?

**Whitney**

Correct. In downtown Cincinnati.

**Scott**

How long have you worked there?

**Whitney**

A long time - my entire career - post-college. This summer will be my 16th year.

**Scott**

What's the actual layout of the building? When you walk through the door, are you, like, in a lobby or something? How's that laid out?

**Whitney**

The building is primarily used by Fifth Third Bank employees. However, there are several restaurants that connect mainly because we need to eat. So, there is a Dunkin Donuts, a Graeter's ice cream shop, and 2 sandwich shops. So, all of them connected in that lobby. In order to get up into the Fifth Third Headquarters, you have to pass through a turnstile, you must have access via a badge, etc.

**Scott**

So, you have to go through a revolving door and then a turnstile?

**Whitney**

Correct. So, you have to go through the revolving door to get to the lobby which has, again, the restaurants that I've named. Then, in order to get into Fifth Third, you have to go through the turnstile.

**Scott**

Alright. When this happened, it was just a typical Thursday morning. What time do you normally get to work?

**Whitney**

Most of the time, I work out of Louisville, Kentucky, but every week, I would take a trip to Cincinnati, mainly, because of a major project that I had been working on at that point. If I go to Cincinnati, there are 2 paths that I can choose from. I can leave very early in the morning before

6 AM in an effort to get there before the 7.30 AM or 8.00 AM traffic into Cincinnati, or I can leave a little bit later so that I can avoid it all together - leaving some time between 7.30 and 8.30 will do that for you. So, I had chosen to leave at a later time on this given day.

**Scott**

As this was happening, you were walking in and talking on the phone. Before you entered the building, when you were outside and looked into the building, could you have seen what was happening? Was it all glass?

**Whitney**

Thinking back, I'm not sure. I have not been back to the building since the shooting at this point, which has been a little longer than 7 months. I don't know if you can see in through the glass or not. If you can, it's probably difficult and you probably have to get pretty close to do that. What I noticed in that revolving door is one sheet of glass was completely shattered from top to bottom, but the glass was still fully intact. So, one would think, "Why would you step into a door where there's glass everywhere? You could cut yourself, etc." It wasn't like that - it was still intact. There was also a hole in that door - in that glass sheet - that was probably the size of a bullet, but none of those thoughts crossed my mind. I thought that somebody threw a rock or that it must have been a rock that caused this to occur. So, I just kept going and pushing through that door, and that is one of my biggest regrets. Even if it was a rock, there should have been red flags waving in my brain, "What are you doing? Why are you walking into a door that has glass shattered within it?"

**Scott**

Right. But I recalled or read that you were on the phone at that time, right? Were you on a conference call?

**Whitney**

Yeah, I was on the phone but I still wouldn't give myself that excuse. I was absolutely focused on that call about a subject matter that we had worked through multiple times before but hadn't come to a conclusion yet as to how we wanted to address this issue. This was the third time that we were talking about this subject matter, so I was very focused. But in my mind, that is still not an excuse for pushing that door with shattered glasses and a hole.

**Scott**

Well, you get the luxury of looking back on it now to, kind of, Monday morning quarterback what you did.

**Whitney**

I know. I tell people all the time now to pay attention to their surroundings. I personally don't walk around taking phone calls anymore because it's just too difficult to concentrate on multiple things.

**Scott**

Right. People get hit by cars while they're talking on the phone. So, take us through what happened as you walked through that door. It was immediate chaos, right? Can you just take us minute-by-minute through what happened?

**Whitney**

Yes. In total, it wasn't more than a couple of minutes. As soon as I pushed that door, I was immediately hit by a barrage of bullets, mostly, on the right side of my body. Now, I know from my physicians that I was hit 12 times. I was immediately hit at my right arm and at the right side of my body. Then, I collapsed onto the bottom of that quadrant. So, if you can imagine four sections of a revolving door, I was stuck within one and I never made it out of that door until I was rescued minutes later. So, I never even made it into the building - I was stuck right there in that quadrant. The force of the first barrage forced me to collapse. So, I was sitting at the bottom of that revolving door and felt a lot of pain - it was coupled with confusion. I was trying to sort through my brain what was happening to me, so I didn't allow myself to only focus on the pain - there was a lot more to think of and a lot more to work through. So, again, I collapsed on the floor, I felt pain, and I tried to figure out what happened to me.

**Scott**

Did you see the gunman before he shot you?

**Whitney**

No, I never saw him - not even once - but I knew and concluded that this was a mass shooting. There's no other reasonable explanation for what happened to me. This is absolutely the result of bullets. Then, I was left to think, "What am I going to do? How am I going to get out of this situation?" My first thought was to just get up and walk out, but I didn't know why I couldn't at that moment. Minutes later when I was rescued, I did actually walk out with assistance. I couldn't muster up enough strength to just physically get up and get out of that quadrant, so that option wasn't going to work. I scanned all of Fountain Square and there wasn't a soul to be seen. So, nobody was going to come to rescue me. I couldn't get out of this situation. Then, the third option was to call someone, so I tried to move my arm to get to my phone, but I didn't even have enough strength to move my arm to pick up my phone. I was really contorted at the bottom of that revolving door. I was still in the conference call that I was a part of - I heard them speaking to me - but I had placed the phone on mute before I crossed over Fifth Street to walk into Fountain Square, so they couldn't hear what was going on either. So, all three options that I had to get out of that situation weren't going to work. So, at that moment, I felt helpless, hopeless and despair - I was in pain and coughing up blood. Those thoughts were going through my brain because I just didn't see a way out of this situation. Then, as I tried to move and make that phone call, that's when I got hit again by a second barrage of bullets. I thought that happened because I moved - whoever was shooting at me thinks that I'm still alive. So, I didn't want to do that again. So, I played dead until this situation resolves itself.

**Scott**

At that point, do you know how many other people had already been shot? At that point, do you know where the shooter and other victims were at?

**Whitney**

I know that I was at the end. I have not gone back and looked over the videos or details in the way that many others have simply because of my ability to move forward as a mentally strong individual.

**Scott**

But you did know that other people had been shot and there were multiple 911 calls as well throughout that time?

**Whitney**

Yes, absolutely.

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(Caller 1)

**911 Operator**

Cincinnati Police. We receive a 911 call from this number. Is everything okay?

**Man**

Yes, ma'am. I'm in the Fifth Third Building in downtown where the Fountain Square is. We are by the dock area and I had 2 people who had been shot.

**911 Operator**

Okay, you have 2 people who had been shot. Where are they at?

**Man**

They are in the basement of this Fifth Third Building in Fountain Square where we have, like, a loading dock.

**911 Operator**

Okay. Are they in the basement by the loading dock?

**Man**

Yeah.

**911 Operator**

I've got them on the way. Did you see who shot these people?

**Man**

Who shot them... I think he was in the lobby.

**911 Operator**

Can you give me a description of them?

**Man**

I couldn't see. They have no cameras in the lobby so we're not able to find out.

**911 Operator**

Alright. I got people on the way, okay?

**Man**

Alright. We will be waiting outside by the door.

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(Caller 2)

**911 Operator**

911. What is the address of your emergency?

**Woman**

Yeah, I'm hiding at Fountain Square. I don't know what's going on. I don't know if there's, like, a shooter in the building or something.

**911 Operator**

Okay, are you at Fountain Square and Graeter's?

**Woman**

Yeah.

**911 Operator**

Okay, what's going on there? What do you see?

**Woman**

I don't know. I saw someone that looked like they had a gun and, kind of, heard of gunshots.

**911 Operator**

Okay. Can you give me a description of the person that you think had the gun?

**Woman**

I don't know. He looks like he is wearing a business suit.

**911 Operator**

Male in a business suit. Do you remember what color the business suit was?

**Woman**

No. We're hiding at Graeters'

**911 Operator**

That's okay. I want you to stay exactly where you are. I've got officers there on scene. I want you to stay where you are. I'll let officers know that you're at Graeters'. Is the door locked?

**Woman**

No, the front door is not locked. We ran into the bathroom and the bathroom door is locked. We just hear the bell ring.

**911 Operator**

Okay, I want you to stay where you are. Like I said, I've got officers there on scene. Okay?

**Woman**

Did you get other calls about this?

**911 Operator**

We've got hundreds of calls.

**Woman**

Okay.

**911 Operator**

Okay. Stay where you are. I'll let them know that you're in the bathroom at Graeters', okay?

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**Scott**

So you were there in the middle of this revolving door and were, kind of, out of options. What did you do?

**Whitney**

Again, I was feeling very hopeless and in a state of despair. Then, the police arrived very, very quickly. The moment that I saw an officer out of my left eye - he was positioned by the ATM, which was closer to the Graeters' ice cream shop - I knew that I had a way out of this situation that I was in. So, my thoughts quickly shifted from "I don't have any way out of this situation. I'm coughing out blood. I think that I'm going to die" to "Nop. I'm getting out of here." So, at that point, I shifted between 2 points of view - which was interesting - one was, "Get me out of here." I kept screaming at him, "I have a 5-year-old and a 7-year-old. They need their mother. You need to get me out of this revolving door." I couldn't understand why he didn't immediately just run over and save me. Looking back, I understand that's not protocol, that's not how these situations are approached, you have to eliminate the danger first.

**Scott**

how far away was he from you at that time?

**Whitney**

I don't know. Maybe 10-20 feet. Probably about 20 feet.

**Scott**

Certainly close enough that you could communicate by voice...

**Whitney**

Yes, absolutely. Above the sounds of bullets, he could hear me and communicate well with me. The other thought that I had at that moment of time was, "I'm going to get out of here and I'm going to do something to stop all of this." So, I had taken steps to volunteer through a local organization to really try to prevent gun violence, but all I had done was sign up to receive text messages - I'd get them and ignore them because, at the end of the day, there's only so much time for work and family and it's so difficult to slide something else into the mix. At that moment, I thought to myself, "You ignored all those text messages, you never even showed up to one meeting, you deserve to be in this situation. If you get out of this situation, you get the amazing opportunity to get back with your family and your children, you are going to do something about this so that no one else ever has to feel this way." Certainly, this may happen again, but I am fighting as hard as I can to prevent those I love from going through this same situation. So, for a very brief moment in time, I had both of those thoughts - I'm going to get out of here and once I get out of here, I'm going to do something about this.

**Scott**

I find that your line of thoughts is really incredible - when you're literally in danger and not knowing if you would get shot again - that you were thinking of the big picture of "How can we stop this from happening to other people again?" Is that, kind of, the way you often think - like, from a 30,000-foot point of view?

**Whitney**

No. Well, certainly, there were moments that I think that way at work regarding the products that I manage. I think so many of us get caught up in the hustle and bustle of everyday life and we don't take enough time to take that massive step backward to think about what's important in life. So, in that brief moment, what was important in life was me getting home and getting back to my family - it was so natural to think about that next thing. That's the idea of gratitude. If you get the opportunity to live then you have to do something with that, because very few people get that.

**Scott**

That's very true. At that point, you were in contact with Officer Staples and you had been shot 12 times. Correct?

**Whitney**

Yes.

**Scott**

Can you describe where did these bullets hit you at? Where were they on your body?

**Whitney**

Most of them went through the right side of my body - from my shoulder down to my right hip. There were a few that crossed my upper torso and a few that went through my left arm as well. From my belly button down, there was nothing other than one skim at the top of my left foot, which is why when I got rescued, I had to walk out of that revolving door with support.

**Scott**

It's incredible that you were not hit at any major organ or artery - you could have bled out very quickly.

**Whitney**

No. I say all the time that there were thousands of things that went right and one of them, I believe, is that I was protected by that revolving door. So, every bullet that came through me had to go through that revolving door first. So, although there were instances of bullets going in and out, others are very superficial when they went in and out of my body. So the damage that I have in terms of long-term effects is minimal, I believe, because those bullets had to travel through that revolving door first before they entered my body.

**Scott**

Alright. So, you were communicating with Officer Staples. I actually spoke with Officer Staples. Let's hear, for just a minute or two, his perspective on what was happening at that time.

**Officer Al Staples**

I'm Cincinnati police officer, Al Staples. My thoughts on September 6, 2018, when I saw Whitney was, "Wow, she was hurt bad. What can I do, obviously, to help her survive this incident?" Our conversation started out - as soon as we made eye contact - with "You have to help me." My first response was, "Stay down." She told me with a fainting voice, "I am married. I have 2 little kids and I want to be a mommy again." The look in her eyes, her intentionality, and her will to live made me, of course, react. As soon as I heard that the situation was somewhat contained, I had another officer help me pick her up out of a bed of glass and a pool of blood and get her to a safe spot where we could try to render aid. I knew she was a survivor. Anything I would say about that day was that God had to have a plan and purpose for Whitney in

everything that she does with the Whitney/Strong and use this as an educational incident for people to be able to recover and survive from something like this. Continue to be strong, Whitney, and thank you.

**Scott**

When Officer Staples came over to you, what did he do? What happened from that point?

**Whitney**

Much of it was a blur because it was in such a short window of time, but I know that he picked me up with another officer. They walked me from the revolving door to a flagpole. The only reason I know that is because I've seen a video of it - I do not remember that. In fact, my memory was that he carried me, but I know that's not true based on the video footage.

**Scott**

How far away did he bring you out of the danger area?

**Whitney**

I would say that it was probably 40 feet. If he was 20 feet away from me at the ATM, then it was probably an additional 20 feet past that. It's a flagpole with a bench right there on Fountain Square, parallel to Fifth Street. They got me to that bench and sat me down. Then, he went back to work and made sure that there wasn't any additional danger. I don't think they were certain if there were one or two shooters at that point, etc. They just knew that they had a little period of time in which they could safely get me out.

**Scott**

What happened while you were waiting there? I assume that, obviously, they would call EMTs to come and take you away. During that time when you were there, what happened?

**Whitney**

So I remember they sat me down - I was sitting up in pain. I was red everywhere - I made the bright decision to wear a cream shirt that day. I was drenched in my own blood. I couldn't see my body, so I didn't know where any of the holes were. I just kept visualizing that I was, like, a piece of Swiss cheese - I've got holes everywhere and everything hurts so bad. I think that they sensed that and allowed me to lay back down. Then, the first responder who got to me was a female officer, Kara Graves. She applied a tourniquet, which is another one of those thousands of things that went right. The Cincinnati Police Department carries tourniquets with them or in their vehicles - she had hers with her. So, she pulled it out and applied a tourniquet to my arm. As I've now done a lot of work with the "Stop The Bleed" program, so I know that it is a really important step to saving someone's life when they have a lot of uncontrolled bleeding. So, they applied a tourniquet. They tried to make me as comfortable as possible and propped up my legs. I remember thinking, "I need to stay aware and cognizant of what's going on." So, I instinctively moved into breathing exercises - I don't know why. It's not like I learned breathing exercises for pregnancy or anything like that. I just breathe in through the nose and breath out through the mouth - I must have done that for probably two hours straight. I also remember thinking, "I'm making decisions. I'm telling people what to do. I'm giving officer Al Staples my husband's phone number so that he can connect with Waller. I'm breathing deeply through these exercises. I feel my heart beating just fine. I know it is a problem for me to have all of these holes, but I also think that it's a really, really good sign that I feel as strong as I do right now and I'm thinking as clearly as I do. So, just keep that up. Just keep going through those motions." The last thing I remember thinking was, "This hurts like hell. You need to get

somebody here now to give me some medication so that I am not in so much pain.” And that is the only moment in which it felt like things took a very long time, although they didn't. EMS was there in a good amount of time just as well as the police arrived to the scene of the shooting. At that moment, I was in a lot of pain. I must have said 3-4 times - I'm sure that it was not in a very polite manner - “When is someone going to be here to give me some medicine for this pain?”

**Scott**

Yeah. Well, of course, your time perspective would be off. That's understandable. Did you talk to your husband during that time?

**Whitney**

I did. It was Al's idea. He said, “Do you have anybody you want to call?” And I said, “Yes. Let's call my husband.” Looking back, there was a humorous moment when I gave out my phone number - I was thinking clearly except for that one moment. When he called it, he said, “Whitney, that's your number.” I said, “You're right. Shoot. Here's my husband's number.” So, he called Waller. He was in our backyard installing a security system. He immediately heard the sirens. Al conveyed that I had been involved in an active shooting. I could just hear how terrified and upset he was from his voice and I just said, “Give me the phone. Let me talk to him.” Then, I said something to the effect of, “I've been shot so many times. It hurts so badly, but my heart's beating just fine and I'm breathing just fine. So, you get up here right now!” Then, I gave him the phone back. It wasn't, “I love you,” or anything else. It was just, “This is what I need you to do.”

**Scott**

You're a very practical thinker, aren't you?

**Whitney**

Yes. I guess that's also because I was in a crisis situation. I really was focused on how good I felt even though I had gone through what I had gone through. So, unless there was something that I just didn't understand at all, I was convinced that I was going to live, and to every person that encountered me, I'd say, “I have a 5-year-old and a 7-year-old. I need to get home to them. So, you need to save me. What do you think? Am I going to live?” Not one person ever said, “You're going to live.” They just said, “You're doing great. Just keep it up. Just keep doing what you're doing.” So, I drew comfort from that even though it was a bit nebulous.

**Scott**

Yeah. That's what the EMTs told you?

**Whitney**

The nurses, the EMTs, the physicians, and everybody I encountered.

**Scott**

I wonder if that's how they were trained to respond as opposed to saying, “You're going to live” and making a promise that they don't know.

**Whitney**

I don't know. Certainly, in the beginning, it would be too difficult for anybody to know one way or another because I hadn't yet had any scans. They didn't know what internal bleeding had occurred, what organs had been hit, etc. Once I got to the hospital and the pain medication started to set in, that's when things became a bit more fuzzy for me. I know that I had a lot of scans. I know that, at one point, I was in a room with over 15 medical professionals. That's

when things started to get pretty fuzzy. Upon arrival, from then on, things became very fuzzy. As scans came back, they would continue to convey to the people that were there. Initially, 2 of my bosses were there because my family wasn't there yet - Cincinnati is more than an hour and a half away from Louisville. Once my family arrived, there was more and more good news, like, "She's been shot 12 times, but none of her organs or major arteries were hit. It's a miracle."

**Scott**

That is incredible. What I also find very interesting is the fact that you never lost consciousness from the time of the shooting until you got to the hospital and received pain-relieving medicine.

**Whitney**

Nope, I didn't. They kept telling me to not allow that to happen - I'm sure part of it was due to adrenaline and the other part was due to anxiety. I wasn't gonna let it happen. I needed to feel comfortable enough with my chances of getting out of this before I was gonna lose consciousness and, ultimately, I didn't.

**Scott**

So how long were you in the hospital?

**Whitney**

It was 5 days.

**Scott**

Are you fully recovered now?

**Whitney**

No, not fully recovered. But when people see me, they wouldn't know that this had happened to me because my clothing hides so much. Now, granted, it's been cooler. As we head into the spring and summer months, people will start to see my scars because I have two very big scars - one from my right wrist all the way up to my right elbow and, then, one from my right bicep up through my armpit into my shoulder. So, there won't be any way to hide that at the pool or the beach or in short shirts. On my left hand, I have a few little scars. What was left and needed to be fixed was my left hand. I ended up having to do a tendon transfer from my index finger to my thumb because my left thumb just couldn't thumbs up. I had a ruptured tendon. So, I was going through pretty intense occupational therapy right now to try and get my index finger and my thumb to work the way that they need to. Then, my right arm in general is not as strong as it used to be. I've been doing nearly 6 months of physical therapy at this point. I was told, initially, "You may not be able to throw a football the way you used to." I wasn't going to throw a football but, a couple of weekends ago, I got out on a basketball court and made a free throw. So, I thought, "You're wrong. I'm going to get this back." So I've been getting more and more strength in my right arm. My big problem was supination. Basically, my right forearm needs to be able to rotate in a way that my palm faces up to the ceiling, and I'm just not there yet. So, if you can envision someone putting change onto my right hand, if I don't pay attention, it'll fall out because it just wasn't really flat. So, we're also working on that through occupational therapy. Other than that, things feel tighter than they used to and I don't walk around in pain.

**Scott**

That's good. You made a lot of progress. Did I read correctly somewhere that you actually hope to never fully recover?

**Whitney**

I mean, I won't ever fully recover - there will always be tightness. I'm similar to older individuals who would feel it in their bones when the rain comes or the cold sets in because of what I've gone through. If all of this is no longer physically present, then it's so much easier for me to dismiss what happened today and go on back to my old life, which was a great life. It was a life that was fast-paced with hustle and bustle and not - as we discussed at the very beginning - the kind of life where you would take the time to take a step back and think about what you should be doing with your life as opposed to what seems natural and what seems obvious.

**Scott**

You said that you've never been back to that building yet. Is that because of the trauma that happened there or is that just because you don't need to go back there to continue work?

**Whitney**

Well, first off, I'm still on medical leave - I should be going back shortly. So, I haven't had a need to go to that building, but when I have a need to go to that building, I'm not going to be excited about it. I will still certainly do it and be fine, but I try to avoid it for as long as possible. There was a request to do a photoshoot on Fountain Square, and I said, "No, I'm not ready to go back to Fountain Square yet."

**Scott**

I love your determination and your attitude of, "When I need to go back there, I'll do it. That's just the way it is."

**Whitney**

Right. No, I'm not gonna allow any of this to prevent me from doing what I want to do in life. It just makes me more determined. I was already a pretty determined individual before this happened, so this really just amplifies that part of my personality.

**Scott**

You and your husband, Waller have started a nonprofit as a result of this shooting. Can you talk about that? What's going on there?

**Whitney**

Yes. From the moment I was stuck in that revolving door, I knew that I wanted to do something about this. Luckily, my supportive husband agreed that he wanted to do something as well. So, when we were in that hospital in the first week, we spent a lot of time thinking about how we can approach this issue in a different way. It is such a politically volatile issue and we wanted to really cut through all of that. We both considered ourselves to have very centrist minds in terms of politics. Is there a way to cut through all of that volatility and figure out a way to find those solutions that everybody can get behind? So, that's what we wanted to do. We didn't exactly know how we wanted to do that. We didn't have solutions in mind. Luckily, because I've been given this opportunity to allow my body and mind to heal through medical leave, I've had nearly 7 months to dig into a lot of data, a lot of research, a lot of articles, and figure out what is the best way to approach the issue of gun violence. So, what we narrowed down in terms of our focus is, first off, our mission statement.

Our goal is to reduce the number of gun deaths and we want to do that through responsible gun ownership. That should tell you 2 things... First, all types of gun violence are a problem. Yes, I was involved in a mass shooting and we don't want those to happen. But there are many, many

components of gun violence that we need to consider and take seriously. We cannot take on hundreds of solutions each year because this is a part-time endeavor for everyone that's involved on the board, so we will focus on all aspects over the course of my life because this will be my life's mission. Then, the second one is responsible gun ownership. So much energy has been spent on this idea to eradicate firearms from the United States - it's not going to happen. The United States has a Second Amendment - it is an important amendment - and there's really no reason why we can't say it exists. In connection to the Second Amendment, people need to be responsible with their firearms. So, we're focused on solutions that allow people to keep their Second Amendment rights, and to make sure that they are responsible with the firearm that they have been given.

We have 3 specific solutions that we've settled on for the next couple of years that I can tell you about. The first one is suicide prevention. If you're serious about reducing gun deaths, then you need to be serious about reducing suicides because 60% of gun deaths are by suicide. There are 2 proven programs - the one initiated out of New Hampshire is called the Gun Shop Project, and the other is called CALM. So, I'll start with the first one - we're going to set up the Gun Shop Project in the states of Kentucky and Ohio. So, when an individual who is suicidal walks into a firearm shop, there will be literature, and that literature will give them information, like, "What to do? Are you experiencing these symptoms? If so, here's a hotline for you to get more information and support." That same information will be conveyed to the employees of that gun shop. There will even be, in some instances, a national suicide prevention hotline on the targets in the gun ranges attached to these gun shops. So, the idea is really simple - do everything that we can to get information on preventing suicides in gun shops so that suicidal individuals don't make that decision to buy a firearm and, then, end their life via suicide. So, that's one.

### **Scott**

From a political position, I can't imagine anyone objecting to that.

### **Whitney**

No, I don't think so either. Nobody wants individuals to die at the hands of a gun. So, let's get as much literature and as much information to them as possible so that people within these gun shops can be empowered.

The second one is called CALM, which is Counseling Access to Lethal Means. The idea of "Means matters" originated from the Harvard Public School of Health. What it comes down to is, "Firearms are the most deadly form of suicide." There's this idea that during that brief window of time when someone is suicidal, if you can remove their access to lethal means, then you can get them through that crisis and they will never likely never go back and try and do it again. So, CALM is set up to have that conversation in a medical setting, whether it's in a hospital or a primary care physician's office. Let's make sure that there is a dedicated medical person who can have that simple conversation, "You're suicidal, Mr. Smith. What are your means to suicide? Do you have a firearm at home? Do we have someone that we can talk to store your firearm during this period of time?" So, this one is more focused on using medical professionals to approach the topic of suicide - again, trying to get someone through that period of time and away from access to a firearm. So, both of those solutions are for suicide prevention.

The second solution is focused on enforcing the laws that exist. People are oftentimes familiar with the Brady Act, which is the idea that if you're going to purchase a firearm through a licensed firearm dealer, you'll have to go through a background check. There is a whole list of prohibited person categories that should prevent someone from being able to purchase a

firearm - it could be a criminal conviction for violence, it could be substance abuse, it could be involuntary commitment. This one is personal to me because there was a lot of information that was released after the shooting on September 6 - there was an alleged mental illness of my shooter. Years before the shooting, there was even evidence that both his sister and his mother went to a judge to petition for involuntary commitment in Broward County, Florida. That record has been sealed, so we don't know what happened. If he was involuntarily committed, then he should not have been able to purchase the firearm in August before the shooting occurred in September. So, what we are going to do is launch a full-blown investigation on September 6 to figure out what happened. Was he truly a prohibited person? If so, here is a very clear example to add to the list of prohibited persons gaining access to firearms across this country, who had led to death or injury. We're going to get as many instances as possible of this situation and we're going to elevate it to a very prominent level - even up to the level of the federal government. There's a lot of energy right now. For example, Fix NICS is a bill that was passed in 2018 to make sure that these records do get cleaned up. So, we need to do everything possible to help those that have the power to enforce laws appropriately and to make sure that prohibited persons don't gain access to firearms.

The last one is to enforce the laws that exist and also consider new laws that make sense. So, one of those new laws that make sense is Extreme Risk Protection Orders. Oftentimes, they're referred to as 'Red Flag' laws in the states of Kentucky and Ohio, which were really working to reduce gun deaths. Within those two states, we don't have it, but 14 other states do. The District of Columbia does, but we do not have this law in our states. What does that law do? It allows a family member, law enforcement, and even qualified mental health professionals to petition a very clear path for one of those individuals, to go to a judge and say, "My family member, for example, is in the throes of a crisis. He is threatening to hurt himself or others, and he has access to a firearm. We need that firearm temporarily removed until we can get him through this crisis."

What I like about it is twofold. One, in so many instances of mass shootings, there were warning signs that there was not a clear path for removing that firearm. So our solution enables us to do that. The second thing is it doesn't discriminate. People get access to firearms in a multitude of ways - sometimes through illegal ways. So, this law doesn't discriminate. It doesn't matter how that individual gained access, if they shouldn't have access to firearm because of dangerous behavior, there's a way to remove that firearm. We've put a lot of work into trying to get these laws passed in Kentucky and Ohio. We've been to Washington, DC to speak to individuals about this law. There's a lot of momentum right now. In fact, two weeks ago, we were just in DC for the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the 'Red Flag' law. Even Lindsey Graham, who is the committee chair, is the one who put together this hearing and endorses this law. So, at the federal level, the idea is to pass a law to any state across the United States that has Red Flag, and if they meet the thresholds that have been determined at the federal level, then those states would receive additional funding to be able to implement.

### **Scott**

It sounds like this could really get some traction as opposed to other efforts that have really gotten nowhere.

### **Whitney**

Yes, exactly. That's why we selected it. In order for us to choose a solution and move forward with it, it needs to be supported by the majority first. Secondly, it needs to be proven to be effective. With Extreme Risk Protection Orders live in Connecticut and Indiana for more than 10

years, there is a lot of evidence as to how this law helps reduce suicides. So, it meets both of those things - majority-supported and proven to be effective.

**Scott**

Well, how can people find you, your nonprofit, and take action?

**Whitney**

If you want to follow along with us, the easiest way is through social media. You can follow us with the handle @WhitStrongOrg. You can also follow us through our website, which is WhitneyStrong.org. At this point in time, what is most needed is financial support. We have a board of 14 individuals and all of us have, of course, different skill sets, but many of us are friends back from our MBA days. We feel very confident in the solutions that we have selected, for the most part - we can tackle them. What we do need, though, is financial support in order to be able to tackle them. So you can make a donation through our website, again, WhitneyStrong.org.

**Scott**

I'll have links to the things we've talked about, including your website, on the show notes for this episode. It's quite a story. Whitney, that morning, before you left home, you kissed your 2 children and they asked for a second kiss. Did you ever think about that, in light of what happened?

**Whitney**

Yes, I think about it a lot. That goes back to me trying to not go back to an old life of feeling rushed and always focusing on a to-do list. At that moment, when they asked me to kiss them twice, I felt rushed, "Oh, no. I have to get to work. I don't have time for this." Looking back, I am so thankful that I stopped and took that extra time to give them a kiss. So, when similar instances come up, whether they want a second hug or they want me to sit down and play with them - which you can imagine, as someone who's always on the go, sitting down and playing is not my forte - I would try really hard to stop and focus in on them and be grateful because that is the biggest gift that I was given in all of this. I get to be home with my family - that's all I wanted. So, I try my hardest to be grateful for it.

**Scott**

There's nothing more important.

**Whitney**

I agree.

**Scott**

Whitney, thanks very much for taking the time to share your story with us. I'm glad that you did make it through and I look forward to seeing what your efforts can produce in terms of reducing gun violence.

**Whitney**

Well, thank you.

**Scott**

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