

Episode 115: ShaNae handled a 911 call

Most people don't go to work each day with the concern of going through something that traumatizes them.

If your job is in the medical field, such as in a hospital, you might be saddened when a patient you've been working with ends up dying. Or if you work in retail, you know there's going to be the occasional angry or irrational customer who really gets your blood pressure up.

Here in America, we have the unique problem of school teachers being traumatized because of the very real threat of someone taking a gun and shooting them and their students. We think we're so smart, yet we're the only country in the world who hasn't put an end to that horrifying problem.

But for the most part, people go to work, and they come home, and they don't suffer mentally from what happened that day.

The big exception to this are the people who work in emergency situations. Firefighters, police officers, EMS - these people are subjected to traumatic situations as a normal part of their job.

And included in that group are 911 emergency dispatchers. In fact, there's a growing movement that includes legislation to get rid of the common job title "call takers". Instead, 911 dispatchers are increasingly being recognized as first responders, and they're getting more access to mental health care, because of what they experience in their work.

My guest today is ShaNae. She knew what came with her job as a 911 dispatcher – long stretches of routine calls, punctuated by the sudden big adrenaline-inducing call from someone who was in serious trouble. It was part of the job. She was trained for this and she knew what to expect.

But there was one day when a call came in, and it changed everything.

Scott

To really understand ShaNae's story, you need to know about something she went through as a teenager. When she was 13, she started to have a problem with physical activity.

ShaNae

Yeah, I was in seventh grade and I was playing soccer. I was doing dance. I was very active. Overnight, I could run easily and then I couldn't - it happened really quickly. Initially, we just thought, "Well, maybe you need to build up that endurance. You need to build up that stamina." So, I was running more, but it didn't get easier - it got harder, if anything.

Scott

Eventually, she got tested and she found out that she had something called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, or HCM - that's a disease of the heart.

ShaNae

Your left ventricle is getting thicker and thicker. It's almost as if the two walls of your heart are closing in on each other which, as you can imagine, prevents adequate blood flow through each chamber. So that's why you get dizzy, lightheaded, short of breath, and you can even faint.

Scott

ShaNae remembers very clearly the day her dad brought her to the doctor, and they got the news of that diagnosis.

ShaNae

I remember that day very vividly, actually, because it's almost just a blip in time. I don't remember anything before or after, really. My dad took me to that appointment at a children's hospital, and he and I both sat in the waiting room thinking, "They'd run all their tests. They're going to come in and say that she has asthma or something like that." We never could have imagined what they were going to tell us. We didn't have any experience with heart disease prior to this - our family was relatively healthy. Anyways, the doctor came in. She said, "You have this condition called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Here's what that means for you. Here are the risks. What that meant was that my whole lifestyle and identity had to shift." At 13, you're already trying to deal with school bullies and puberty and social pressures, so it was a lot. I remember almost being stunned and in shock for quite a long time. My dad didn't really know what to say either. We were just, kind of, put on this path of discovery and went from there. I remember driving back to school that day - my mom taught at the school at the time - and I just walked into her classroom, hugged her, and cried. At that time, she didn't fully know why I was crying, but she quickly found out.

Scott

Since HCM is a genetic disease, ShaNae's family was tested and they discovered that her 3 brothers also had it, but hers was more serious.

ShaNae

The thing with HCM is that it's a progressive condition, typically, so you may plateau at some point. Your heart may get thicker. It might lose some of its function. You could reach to a point where you never need to do anything about it - you're just aware of it. Maybe you would take some beta blockers or be extra careful not to run a marathon or anything like that. Then, there are people whose condition progresses to the point of heart failure where they need to be considered for an organ transplant, and that's where I was, eventually.

Scott

ShaNae got through high school and most of college, but her condition got so bad that a heart transplant was the only option. She found that being on the transplant list came with its own set of problems.

ShaNae

That's when my cardiology or my heart failure team decided I needed to be listed. Luckily, it was my last year of school, so I still graduated. When you're listed as a heart transplant recipient or a potential heart transplant recipient, things happen. For example, no one really wants to hire someone who's listed on an organ list because you could get called out at the drop of a hat and have to leave that job for God knows how long - at least several months.

Scott

ShaNae was on the heart transplant waiting list for two years.

ShaNae

At the time, I was lucky enough to get a teaching job in one of our local school districts. They knew of my situation and they were willing to work with me, and it was the last month of the school year. At that point, I had been on the list for 2 years. One month left in the school year and I was so sick. It was getting really, really hard. I even started to talk about taking the last month of the school year off. It was just so hard at that point. Luckily, on a Monday morning, May 7 of 2018, at about 6 AM, my phone started going off. The thing about being on the transplant list is you could get a call at any point, so you can't really travel anywhere. You always have to be within cell service. In the case that your phone does fail, you carry a little pager with you around as well so that if they can't contact you on your phone, they will page you to the hospital.

At 6 AM, on Monday, May 7, my phone started ringing. I knew there was only one person on the planet that would be calling me at 6 AM - it was my cardiologist at that time, Dr. Keith Asher who was amazing. I was already choking back tears at this point. I knew exactly why he was calling. He said, "I'm pretty sure we have a really great match, but just standby. I'll call you back in a couple of hours to confirm." So, they did some of their tests to see if it was worth me heading up to the hospital - he called me back - and it was. So, I was transplanted that day, which in and of itself was a blessing because a lot of transplant patients have at least one - we call it - false call. They'll go up and they start getting ready and prepped, but once the surgeon gets in there and actually gets his hands on the heart, it was not up to their standards, and they send you home. I was lucky that this was the first time I had ever been called and the last time I was. I got that heart that night on May 7.

Scott

At that point, ShaNae felt like her life was brand new again.

ShaNae

This gave me a second chance at life. I was so excited to see what I could do because I hadn't been able to do much for years. I was already planning to build a bucket list, get healthy enough to start crossing things off and see what my body was physically capable of that I didn't know. I wasn't familiar with how it could move and breathe and function.

Scott

With that information as the backdrop, today's story begins with ShaNae's new job.

ShaNae

After the transplant, I was hoping to go back to teaching. I loved it. I thought I'd found my purpose here - I was teaching and it was amazing - but that didn't work out either. When you get transplanted, you're immunocompromised severely for the rest of your life. Just so that your own body doesn't attack that foreign organ - the situation I would have been in that job wasn't conducive to being immunocompromised - so here I was, again, trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.

A really good friend from high school had posted on social media about her job having openings. She worked at our local dispatch agency. I thought about it for a minute - what that might mean for me or what it entails - and I kind of talked to her. I thought, "I've never shied away from a challenge before." I definitely am an adrenaline junkie on some level although, at that time, I didn't have much to prove it because heart disease had kept me grounded quite

literally for most of my life. But I thought it sounded cool. At the time, my now ex-husband was a police officer. I thought, "Well, it might be cool to, kind of, be on the other side of calls and know a little bit more about what goes on in his day-to-day." So, a day later, after seeing her posts and talking to her, I applied.

Becoming a dispatcher is no easy process. The onboarding process for dispatching is long and extensive, as you might imagine. There are background checks, skills tests, and a handful of interviews. I don't think it was until several weeks later that I was offered a full-time position. This is emergency dispatching. So when civilians call 911 or your local non-emergency line, we are the ones to take those calls. Classroom training for dispatchers is certainly intense and comprehensive, but the best training I received was on the job gaining that real-life experience and learning from the people around me. At that time, this particular dispatch agency covered 2 counties, which was still the case at the time as well. They cover 29 cities, 13 police departments and 29 fire departments, so they're busy. They're a rather big agency. At any given time, there were, I believe, 8-10 people on the floor taking calls. Both our emergency and non-emergency shifts were 12 hours long. You either work the day shift from 7 AM to 7 PM or the opposite night shift.

Each dispatcher had a role while they were working on the floor. Some were just call takers - generally, those were the newer people - others were fire and medical dispatchers while some were radio dispatchers who were responsible for communicating with law enforcement. I remember working my first real shift. I mean, here I was on a floor of 8-10 people in a room, all multitasking at desks with 4-5 large monitors in front of them for 12 hours a day. It was certainly intimidating at first, but I was excited to, kind of, get in there and learn the ropes. The calls themselves were coming for anything you could imagine - I mean stolen property, someone locked out of their car, loud neighbors, you name it. Of course, there were some calls where the person on the other line was having quite possibly the worst day of their life. I mean, as you can imagine, dispatchers were trained to help people in distress, how to talk them down, send the help they need or even be the help they need.

Scott

I'm just picturing you as a brand new dispatcher. You're kind of overwhelmed a little bit and excited and the adrenaline is going through your brand new heart. Were you getting too excited about this job?

ShaNae

That is a good question. I haven't thought about that to this day - I don't know if I ever thought about that. Now that I'm getting older and I have cortisol going through my veins at all times, I often think, "Oh, is this good for me? Maybe I shouldn't be doing that." It was exhilarating and something along those lines actually. With a new heart, it's loud - if that makes sense. With a weak heart - my previous heart - it was so sick and so weak that I couldn't really hear or feel a beating. I mean, no one can. You probably don't feel your own heart beating in your chest. But with a new heart, you can feel it - it was very loud. I could hear it in my ears. I could feel it in my throat. So certainly, when my adrenaline was rushing, it was even louder - I would say that lasted about a year. It was all new and very exciting.

There was a lot of pressure but it is a really interesting job and that really sunk in for me - or during the first day on the floor. I mean, these people were amazing at what they did. It was genuinely fascinating to watch the seasoned dispatchers take high-intensity calls. They would jump from one screen to the next and communicate with multiple people on multiple radio

channels while navigating first responders to a location and typing notes in the call log at - at least - 100 words a minute. I mean, their fingers were just flying across the keyboards. They're pretty incredible people. The job was emotionally hard and physically exhausting - certainly not conducive to any kind of work life balance - but it was rewarding. I always wanted to help people, so I was excited to learn the ropes and hopefully stay long-term. Early on in the job, I could remember most calls, especially the ones that made my adrenaline spike. As time went on, calls started meshing together and it was only the rare few that stuck in the back of my mind - usually, if they involve children, or were particularly violent or the occasional call with folks that were making hilariously stupid decisions. I have a couple of those that will always stick with me.

Scott

Like somebody calling from McDonald's because he got the wrong order. I know people do that.

ShaNae

Yes. There was this one in particular. This young woman called in and she said her boyfriend had just broken up with her. So she called in and said, "Pull him over and give him the fattest ticket you possibly can. He's broke, so he won't be able to pay it. Then, I'll call in a few months later and get him pulled over again so that he'll go to jail for unpaid tickets." I mean, I'm all for supporting women and, maybe, the dude deserved this level of spite, but it went against protocol to oblige my new heartbroken friends, so I wasn't able to do a real solid that day, but that was pretty funny.

Scott

Well, there was one day when you got a call that you will remember forever...

ShaNae

Yes. March of 2019. At that point, I had been a dispatcher for about 8-9 months. I was working the day shift with some of my absolute favorite people. It was a killer crew. I really did enjoy going into work. On Monday, the 11th, I was one out of 8 to 10 dispatchers taking calls just like any other day - nothing super special had happened yet. We were about three-quarters of the way through our shifts. At 5.22 PM, a call came through and I was the first to pick it up. When a call comes from someone dialing 911, it goes to our emergency line and the caller on the other end hears, "911, what's the address of your emergency?" This question is pre-recorded by the dispatcher so that we don't have to say that every time we pick up a line. While that question is being asked, hopefully, the caller would respond accordingly, and then we would take notes, prep ourselves to ask the next question and send help their way. As you can imagine, not everyone is calm enough to answer that question and give us an address right away. Again, they're often calling on one of the worst days of their lives - adrenaline's pumping and emotions are heightened - so it's really not unusual for a dispatcher to have to repeat the question several times and help the caller focus. We need that address right away to get help moving in their direction while we ask them more questions.

At 5.22 PM on the 11th of March, the caller on the other end was very quick to answer the question and my eyes immediately darted to a different monitor that had the caller ID because I had to confirm when I was hearing. I just thought, like, "What are the odds?" I didn't want to believe this could be happening. I checked the caller ID and the GPS map that was on a third screen and the call was definitely coming from that address. So I quickly responded with, "Mom, is this for dad?" That's when she realized it was me on the other end. Her first thought was, "Oh, no..." But her mind quickly focused back on the matter at hand and she responded, "Yes, it's your dad. He's not breathing."

When I spoke to my mom about this day just last week, actually - I mean, I've spoken to her about it before but we kind of touched base on it - she doesn't remember hearing me say anything after that. She remembers another dispatcher coming on the line just seconds later telling her that help was on the way and she needed to try CPR. However, I remember saying something like, "Okay, Mom, I'm going to talk you through how to do CPR. You need to get dad flat on his back."

When a dispatcher takes a medical emergency, we'd get the address and then ask another question. As the caller was responding, we would mute ourselves. We did this so that we could yell "page" out to the room, to the floor. Yelling "page" would let the radio dispatcher know to send an ambulance or page an ambulance to the address on our call. So if my mum didn't hear what I said, it's more than likely that I just muted myself too soon because my brain was more than ready to send an ambulance her way. However, either way, when I yelled at the room, I said, "Page. This is my dad." I was ready to get back on the call and do what needed to be done. However, I noticed, at that time, that the adrenaline had finally hit me. It was kicking in. The room was spinning. My hands were shaking. My heart was in my throat. I didn't know what was going to happen next. I was just, "Well, you got a job to do. Try and focus and not pass out." To be honest, I still don't remember exactly what happened next, but I had dear friends there that day who told me about it and, kind of, gave me some insight into what happened. One particular dispatcher that was there that day told me a couple of things - when I spoke with her just last week as well - that I didn't remember. The point from when I yelled "Page, this is my dad" to the point that I left the dispatch center is a blur. So, I looked to her to, kind of, give me some clarity on that.

Heather

When that call came in, she yelled "Page. This is my dad", we all told her to put the call on hold and to get out now.

Scott

ShaNae's coworker, Heather.

Heather

She was in such a daze that she ran out of the room without even putting the call on hold. One of us had to reach over and push the right button to be able to have another dispatcher pick up the call. She ran back into the room because she hadn't brought a car with her to work that day and she didn't know what to do. She looked so helpless. I just gave her my keys and I told her to just go. In hindsight, she probably shouldn't have been driving that day but I didn't know what else to do. We just had to get her there. She really held it together. As she was putting the call in, that's really what got help there so quickly for her. I hope that that can give her a little bit of comfort just knowing that, because of her, her mom had someone there for her as soon as she did.

ShaNae

I gotta say, after hearing Heather talk about her memory from that day, I knew exactly what she meant when she said "It was almost like you weren't there anymore." because what I remember after yelling "Page" isn't necessarily anything visual. If I remember, I dazed - kind of, hyperfocused. I was working so hard to keep my head from spinning and just get the hell out of there. I wanted to start driving to my parents' house as quickly as possible. They lived about 15-

20 minutes away from the dispatch center. I definitely broke her free speed limit or driving law to get there as fast as I could.

On my way, I started to call my siblings because, at that time, we all lived in the same county. I reached my sister, Sabyn, first, who - as luck would have it - was driving home from work and just about to pass the exit that would take her to my parents' house. I told her something like, "Listen to me. I just left work because I got a 911 call from mom. She said dad isn't breathing. You need to get to their house as soon as you can." We didn't stay on the phone very long. I think she knew I needed to make more phone calls, so we quickly got off the phone. The next person I called was my brother, Braden. I told him the exact same thing. Like my sister, he was on the freeway at that time. He had actually been driving home from a job interview and was getting off an exit - this exit could take him either straight to my parents' house or straight to his house, depending on which lane he got off - and he was in just the right spot on that exit to be able to flip around and head their way. If either one of them had gotten the call even a minute later - maybe not even a minute later - they would have missed the exit and it would have taken them much longer to get there - so call it luck, divine intervention, or whatever it was. I'm just glad it worked out that way. I then called my older brother, Clint. After I told him the same thing, he surprised me by saying, "I'm actually already headed over there. I'm only a minute away." I came to find out that my mom had called him before my dad had stopped breathing to see if he was free to come over. So, he was already on his way when my mom called 911. He only lives about 15 minutes away.

Scott

Did she call him because she thought there was a medical situation happening?

ShaNae

Yes - I'll go into my mom's memory from that day - that's exactly right. As I was driving the rest of the way, I got a call from Spencer - my then-husband. Dispatch had been able to get a hold of him. He's always such a calming presence. He said, "Just try to breathe. Don't drive too crazy. It's not going to do anyone any good if you get an accident on your way there. Try not to spiral down any worst-case scenarios." But I already knew my mom had called because my dad wasn't breathing. I didn't really know how much worse it could get. At that point, I was passing the hospital that was near my parents' house. I knew that if he had been alive or if the paramedics were able to get a pulse, I would probably see an ambulance parked out front of the ER, but there wasn't anything there. There was no noise, no commotion, and nothing happening. So, in my gut, something told me that the worst-case scenario was exactly what we were walking into.

Scott

So your mom was there right from the beginning when stuff started happening. How did she handle this?

ShaNae

My mom is a real tough lady. That day, my mom was at work until about 4 o'clock. She had taken my dad's truck actually which was really weird because, at that time, he was pretty ill. His legs were in poor condition due to diabetes. So she took the truck because he could no longer climb up into it and left the car at the house. She thought about leaving work just to go run errands but she figured "I'd better go home and get the car - switch it out with the truck. Car is a lot easier to run errands." When she got home, she noticed that my dad was in the bathroom but the door was slightly open. So she stood outside and asked, "Are you all right? Is everything

okay?" He said, "No, I need your help." So my mom went in and asked what he needed. She asked if he had eaten that day or if he checked his blood sugar, but he couldn't even give a coherent answer. So she left the room to grab his glucose monitor. When she returned, she had to help him use it because he was so weak and his blood sugar was super low. So she got him some apple juice but he was only able to drink about a quarter cup.

Unfortunately, my dad had taken a sharp turn for the worse. Months prior, he had struggled with type 2 diabetes most of his adult life. His kidneys were failing. He was in so much pain all the time. We'd seen him go through heart attacks, strokes, and surgeries. He would always seem to bounce back from episodes like this, so my mom wasn't too alarmed, I guess. However, she did say that this did seem worse than it usually was, but she still wasn't alarmed to the point that she thought he was about to pass away.

When my mom tried to help my dad out of the bathroom, she couldn't. I mean, he's a large dude and he was too weak to help. My mom is petite. She's much shorter than me - I'm 5'10". I don't know how tall she is, but she's much shorter. She got a small build even though she is very strong. My dad is also or was also pretty large. So that's when she left the bathroom to call my oldest brother to head over and help. When she went back in, she was actually able to get my dad laid on his side on the bathroom floor. Then, minutes later, she saw his head roll back and his body just, kind of, go limp. She started saying, "Scott! Scott!" but he wasn't responding. That's when she called 911.

When my coworker took over the 911 call for me to help her with CPR, my mom explained that it was impossible to get my dad flat on his back just because of the position where he was at. He was in a really small bathroom. There was no way to squeeze him through the space that was between the sink and the tub, which is where he was. So she did her best. Luckily, she didn't have to struggle too long because the time from when she called and I picked up to the time that the paramedics got there was only 6 minutes - it was really fast. My older brother, Clint pulled up at the same time as the paramedics, so they were able to go in together and lift my dad out down the hall into the living room to get him flat on his back to see if they could get a pulse. They have only been working on him for a few minutes when my younger brother, Braden pulled up and then my sister soon after.

At that point, I was only five or so minutes away. I just remember speeding around the corner to their street and didn't even necessarily park the vehicle. I just kind of haphazardly parked it in the middle of the road, put the vehicle in park, and then ran out. I was booking it across the street and across my parents' front lawn, and I saw to my right— I don't know why this visual just sticks in my mind but, with traumatic incidents, there are always, like, sights or sounds that just kind of haunt you forever. I looked to my right and my neighbor who I'd known most of my life was standing there. There was a lot of commotion and a lot of people out on our lawn. She and I made eye contact and it was just this flash of "She was horrified." I was horrified too, of course. I think she was trying to wrap her mind around what I was about to walk into. To the other corner of my other eye, I saw Spencer walking up as well - he had just arrived.

I saw the doorway and there were several cops who were just standing there to make sure no one - who wasn't supposed to - came in. I was running at them like a madwoman. I didn't want them to try and stop me, so I yelled, "I'm his daughter. I'm the dispatcher who took the call. Please move." I don't know if they necessarily processed what I'd said - they looked a little confused as I ran past. But again, Spencer was right behind me. He knew the officers who were there at the scene and I think he, kind of, took over that conversation for me. The first thing I

saw when I walked in was my dad on the floor and paramedics standing around him - there was one kneeling over his chest and administering CPR. Because of all of the junk strewn across the room, you could tell that they had tried a lot to get any semblance of a pulse. They must have pumped him with adrenaline or a bunch of other stuff, but there was nothing. There was no sign of life at any point. Then, I looked to my left and I saw my siblings and my mom, kind of, just all huddled there in our hall doorway crying. So, of course, I walked over there.

It was just this surreal moment of, like, "Is this actually happening? Is this something that's happening to us, to our family, to our dad? How do we deal with it?" I think there was an added layer of trauma just because we saw his body and we saw them working on him. For anyone who's ever seen a dead body, they're animated because, even after you pass, your reflexes, your nerves, and everything are still firing - so they're still moving. Even after they called "Time of death" and we knew that he was gone, he would jerk - his muscles would jerk - or he'd make a sound as the air escaped his body, and that was kind of an added level of, "This is just so unreal." I had seen things just working in the medical field prior to internships during college, but I hadn't ever known the person, so it was definitely different.

I don't know if this is the case in every state but, in Utah, if death is attended by a physician - meaning the deceased had been seeing a doctor for medical treatment in the months prior to their death, then a medical examiner isn't called to the scene— obviously, it's requisite of the doctor to confirm if the death could have been a result of poor health or complications before they actually sign off on it, and this was the case for my dad. So, listed on his death certificate, I believe, is complications due to diabetes. It could have certainly been something else. We don't actually know exactly what or why my dad died that day. Dialysis was not even a month away. His kidneys were failing. His legs were to the point that amputation was less than 6 months away. He was taking narcotics on a daily basis for pain. He was certainly confused that day, whether it was the low blood sugar or the drugs. My mom didn't know that, in the month prior, he would become so confused at times that he couldn't even remember if he had eaten or not, let alone taken his pain meds. I mean, there are things that could have happened but, at the end of the day, knowing one way or the other wouldn't have helped us, so we didn't investigate it further.

As my dad was lying there on the floor, we were waiting for the mortician and their staff to come to pick them up. We realized that there was still one person who didn't know that their dad had passed away I had we had a youngest brother, Jason - the baby of the family - who was living out of the country at that time. So we sat on the floor around my dad and my mom made the call. I just can't imagine what it felt like for her to break that kind of news to her son and not be able to hug him at the same time. So that was difficult. At that point, my aunt and uncle - who lived close by - and two of their kids had shown up. My aunt always had a really close relationship with my dad. They were just like buddies. They were goofballs together. As soon as she walked in and saw him on the floor, I just remember her saying - my siblings probably remember more than I do - "Oh Scotty..." She was just breaking down in tears. My uncle who super close with my mom - they were brother and sister— that was the first time I saw my mom really break down. I think that she leaned on him for support through all of this. I remember just feeling relief when he showed up. She was able to hug him because I knew that that was a safe space for her. The rest of the week went how you might imagine - a viewing a few days later and then a funeral that Saturday.

Scott

How quickly life can change... And not that it was completely unexpected with all of his health issues, but you didn't have any warning that this was going to happen that day.

ShaNae

No. I think part of the trauma for me at least was wrapping my head around, "Out of all the days and dispatchers, why did I have to take that call?" I mean, the odds were just tremendous, so I grappled with that for a long time. But as any other control freak might understand, I got to a point where my thinking of that shifted. I thought, "I'm actually grateful that I took that call because I'm a control freak. Because I took it and because I was there, I know exactly what happened and I know that we did everything we could. The paramedics got there so fast. There was nothing else we could have done. He still died." So I couldn't question myself and I couldn't question anyone else because I took the call, so that was reassuring.

Scott

Yeah. Think about another scenario. If some other dispatcher had taken that call, you might not even have been aware of it or maybe, peripherally, you certainly wouldn't have gotten to the house as quickly as you did because you wouldn't have realized that soon.

ShaNae

Exactly. I wouldn't have been able to call my siblings and they wouldn't have gotten there when they did. So it was a blessing in disguise, for sure.

Scott 37:18

You've mentioned type two diabetes, and perhaps he was overweight. Were there other contributing health conditions that move led to this?

ShaNae

Yeah. My dad struggled with a lot in his life both physically and mentally, and a lot of it went untreated. He definitely dealt with depression and anxiety and other things - I'm sure we just didn't have the understanding. He came from a family in a generation where mental health wasn't really anything you would talk about, let alone recognize or get help for. So at that time, his relationship with most, if not all of us, was incredibly strained. I can only speak for myself but, at that time, I had almost completely blocked him out. I had put up some boundaries in order to protect myself not physically, just emotionally.

In the months prior to his passing, his mom had passed away on Christmas Eve 2018 and that was really hard on him and on all of us. I mean, she was my— oh, no, this will make me cry... we called her mama and this was his mom. She lived in California and she was my best friend in a different kind of way than your school best friend. So, it was hard for all of us. He took a really sharp turn after her passing as well. Again, boundaries had to be put up and he had called me the months or - if not months - weeks prior to his passing, leaving voicemails, just pleading with me to call him back, but I never did and I felt so guilty for that for so long. I had the voicemails on my phone, and I would listen to them and just beat myself up. But thanks to therapy and a really good therapist, she altered my thinking on that by saying, "You didn't know he was gonna pass away. You couldn't have known. All you knew was that you needed space and you needed to put up boundaries. So you did exactly what you needed to do and exactly what you should have done, and he passed away, regardless. So you can't possibly feel guilty for that." And that was really helpful.

Scott

So you really don't know what was the cause of death?

ShaNae

No. We certainly don't officially know but I think, mentally he was really struggling. He had actually called both myself and my older brother who struggled with anxiety and, almost, apologized for not believing us our entire lives, for mocking anxiety, depression, and ADHD at times, and he had just been dealing with it badly. He called us to apologize, saying, "I know what it is now. I know what it's like, and it's horrible." So I know mental health was a contributing factor. I know that he was barely hanging on due to medical conditions and having to take pain meds several times a day just to cope. So I think that it was a perfect storm. I think it was a storm of a lot of really awful things.

Scott

Did you ever have any indication that he might be suicidal?

ShaNae

No, not necessarily. In fact, the day prior, when I was talking to my mom about this last week, he had been on the phone with my youngest brother - the one who was living out of the country - telling him something like, "I know now or I realize now, more than ever, that I've got to make some changes." and that doesn't sound suicidal. To me, that sounds like, "Wow, I've hit rock bottom and I need to fix this." So I don't know if it was suicide, but I think it could have been an intentional or an accidental overdose or, maybe, his heart really did just stop and he was gone the second that it stopped. Again, we won't know.

Scott

I wonder how your mom handled it, knowing that she was the last one to speak with him.

ShaNae

Yeah. Again, my mom is just one of the toughest people I've ever met and that comes with a personality that doesn't necessarily love to open up about things - though she will, if you have that level of trust with her and you do it in a safe space. I don't actually know everything about what ran through her mind that day. Actually, I think I do know this because she told me last week that her primary focus was us - her kids. Her primary focus and everything that was running through her mind was, "How is this going to affect the kids? What are we going to do next? Where do we go from here?" because it was so overwhelming, as you can imagine. But other than that, I don't really know what was running through her mind that day. It's a shock for sure - certainly a lot of shock.

Scott

At work, later on, you had a debriefing. Is that a common procedure when you take a traumatic 911 call? What's involved with that?

ShaNae

Yes, absolutely. It happened even just a few days after I believe. My supervisor said, "Hey, we're gonna hold this debriefing for everyone who was there." There had been another really traumatic call that week that involved a child that they wanted to, kind of, combine in this debriefing. She said, "You're more than welcome to come. Of course, you don't have to" because, again, it has only been a few days. But that is very commonplace. They will hold debriefings for events that are particularly traumatic for the dispatchers who were there.

Scott

And did you find that to be helpful?

ShaNae

It was interesting because I think I was still in shock. I don't know if it had been several weeks later that I would have gone because it seemed weird to go to that after my dad had just passed away and talk about it. Looking back, I really do think I was in shock. I went and just, kind of, heard everyone else's version of events from that day because, more than anything, I wanted to know. It was such a blur for me and still is, so I just wanted to hear what happened. I was so riddled with guilt. I was sure that I had done something wrong or, if I had done anything right, he would have survived. So it was really helpful for me to go and hear their version of events and they were all pretty much the same and reassured me that I followed my training. I got my mom handed off soon as possible and I got there quickly. Again, he still passed away. So, it was very helpful.

Scott

How soon was it before you actually went back to work?

ShaNae

I tried to go back to work a few weeks later. I didn't necessarily want the trauma of what happened to keep me from this job that I had grown to love. I really didn't want to go back out there searching for maybe another "career". I had been doing that and I thought I'd found it again. I really craved stability at that time. So, when I went back, I was set on making it work. A few weeks after I returned, I took a 911 call from an elderly couple that lived on my parents' same street - that street has a unique name. So when I heard the caller give me their address, my heart just dropped. I knew who I was talking to and I didn't have a problem finishing the call, but my whole body was reacting and there was a huge spike in adrenaline. It was almost like I was taken aback to that day for a minute. I couldn't believe it. I thought, "You must have the worst luck in the world, ShaNae" because to get another call on the same street, just a couple of weeks after your dad passed away, was kind of unbelievable. It was then that I knew I couldn't stay. It's not that I necessarily believed that I would get another call like that but, every single time I picked up a 911 call, I was on edge and just anxiously waiting to hear the address and never seem to relax at work as I had before. I wasn't anxious every time the phone rang before my dad passed away. I didn't feel my gut drop every time a caller started to give me their address, but now I did and I knew that that wasn't healthy. I also realized that working 12 hours a day with that level of adrenaline and cortisol running through my body, especially as a heart patient, wasn't safe. So, I stayed for, I believe, 4-6 more weeks after I went back and that was it.

Scott

So you're back to looking at what you want to do with your life.

ShaNae

Yes.

Scott

How is your life now? Are you happy?

ShaNae

I am, yeah. So it was - like you said - a whole other identity crisis. I had been through this several times and I kept trying to understand why this was happening. I had worked so hard to,

kind of, build this life for myself to create a map and know exactly what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go, but it just never worked out. I look back and I kind of laugh at myself because I feel selfish and so angry at the world for things not working out. My inner dialogue said this. "Bitch, please. You have a second chance at life. You got a new heart. Enjoy every moment. Don't worry so much about where you work or what you do. Get a job that you enjoy that you can excel at and that you can grow in, but still have time to do the things you want to do with the people you love. ShaNae, you have a new heart, you have a timeline - almost like you have a deadline - and you want to just do what you want to do when you want to do it. So, I then kind of shifted into looking for jobs that allowed me that level of freedom.

So now, I work at a tech company that's close to my house - that's great. I love it. It's certainly never what I thought I would do, but I love what I do, and who I get to do it with. It gives me those freedoms to explore hobbies, and interests, and have holidays and weekends off. That was new for me, so I really enjoy it. I also knew pretty quickly after the incident that I needed to get into therapy. I had previous experience with EMDR trauma therapy, so I sought someone out that could do that and it helps so much, and I'm all the better for it.

Scott

I keep hearing from you and from previous guests about EMDR therapy. The way it works is almost like a miracle.

ShaNae

Yeah. You've probably heard that. It's so bizarre. It's the weirdest thing. When you're doing it, you feel silly sometimes, but how it affects the brain, those connections and synapses that it rebuilds or heals is pretty fascinating. I've done it a few times and it is magic.

Scott

Yeah, it's just amazing. You haven't said it verbally here, but what I'm kind of feeling from you is that, overall, you have kind of a sense of gratitude.

ShaNae

Yes, I think that this incident, the heart transplant, and a few other things have just really continually humbled me and reminded me that I'm lucky to be here. I'm lucky to have the people that I have and the resources that I have and I'm really, really blessed. Of course, I am so beyond grateful for my donor - there are no words. I'm so grateful to those who dedicate their lives and their careers to making the world around them a better place. Those jobs are often underpaying. Those people are overworked. It's high stress. So, I'm super grateful for them. Our family, it was incredibly grateful to the dispatch agency and the paramedics and police officers who were there that day. They were so good. They were so gracious. I know that they did everything they possibly could for us. I mentioned him a couple of times, but my now ex-husband, Spencer, is still an incredible sport to me. He has been through a lot and he's amazing. We're good friends to this day. I think our family has just been continually embraced by the community around us. We're so humbled each time. We're so grateful. If anything is a reminder to pay it forward, I don't want to be someone that has to be helped all the time, I want to be someone that is lucky enough to help - as a reminder that there are good people out there - others too. I want to pay it forward.

Scott

ShaNae did such a great job telling this story. You know, a lot of the people I talk to aren't people who normally get interviewed, so they don't get to practice telling their story all the time.

ShaNae wasn't quite sure how this would go, or how it would turn out. But I'm so proud of her and how she got through it.

In fact, this is ShaNae right after our conversation ended:

Scott:

All right. You did it!

ShaNae

I did. I did the damn thing. It felt good.

Scott

I'm so lucky to be able to do this. One of the big reasons I started this podcast was because I personally love hearing stories like this, and I wanted to not only hear them myself, but I also wanted to bring them to you. So I'm really grateful for all the guests who come on here, and reveal these things about their lives and what they've gone through, and how they came out the other side.

In this episode, ShaNae mentioned that she benefited from EMDR therapy. That stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It's a type of psychotherapy that helps people heal from the distress associated with traumatic memories. If you've listened to past episodes of this podcast, you know I've had other guests mention that even though it seems rather odd at first, they were amazed to find that it worked. Probably the best example of this is my guest Jeff, who told his story in episode #100, titled "Jeff's arm was torn off". If you suffer from PTSD, I really encourage you to talk to your doctor or therapist about looking into EMDR therapy. It has really helped a lot of people.

And if you liked this episode, you might also enjoy episode 66, which is titled "Mariah lost her brother". In that episode, Mariah makes a 911 call, and the dispatcher who takes the call is her mother. And the 911 audio that you'll hear is probably the most intense 911 call I've played on this podcast.

In the podcast listener Facebook group recently, I made an admission about my guilty pleasure – I love watching YouTube videos where someone in the military comes home early, and surprises their spouse or their kids and everyone's crying and happy. If I watch one of those, I just have to click and watch a bunch more of them. So I asked the others in the group – what's YOUR guilty pleasure on YouTube? Lots of great answers to that one. If you'd like to join that discussion and a bunch of others, join us at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook).

And now we've arrived at this week's Listener Story. We end every episode this way – a story from a listener, just like you. If you have a story that's interesting, funny, horrifying, whatever – and you can tell it in a few minutes, just call it in at 727-386-9468. Or record a voice memo on your phone and email it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This Listener Story is a voice you're familiar with – it's ShaNae, today's guest, talking about something that happened to her when she was 18.

Stay safe, and I'll see you back here in 2 weeks.

(Listener Story)

ShaNae

I always love to play soccer as a kid. When I was 13, I started to notice that running was a lot harder than it used to be. One day, I could run the mile at practice with no problem. The next, I was short of breath, lightheaded, and on the verge of passing out. That year, I was diagnosed with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy or HCM. Living with HCM just kind of became my new normal. As crazy as it sounds, one of the primary risks for people with HCM is sudden cardiac arrest. While no cure exists, a preventative treatment option for this is something called an implantable cardioverter defibrillator - or ICD for short - and it does exactly what an external defibrillator can do. It administers life-saving shocks to a heart in the event of a cardiac arrest. As you might imagine, if my heart ever needed a shock from the ICD, chances are I would be out cold unconscious and wouldn't feel a thing. But just in case I ever received what the medical community calls an "inappropriate shock", I was given a magnet to carry with me at all times. These aren't ordinary fridge magnets - they're heavy doughnut-shaped magnets powerful enough to turn ICDs off simply by placing one on your chest over the device.

In 2010, I was 18 years old living at home and pregnant. One night, in early January, I was laying on my parent's bed talking to my mom. Out of nowhere, I was hit by a wave of pain so intense - it felt like an invisible force had exploded inside my body accompanied by a loud bang that only thing I could hear. I instinctively cried out as my body twisted in pain. Before my mom and I could figure out what was going on, it happened again and I let out another blood-curdling scream. My whole body felt nothing but crippling searing pain. Whatever was happening only lasted a second but it was coming from an unseen and unknown source. I was terrified. That's when I realized that my ICD was firing and I was receiving inappropriate shocks. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was awake and conscious. I wasn't in cardiac arrest. I felt fine. There's no reason why my ICD should be firing.

I frantically yelled for someone to grab my magnet off the kitchen fridge. Relief washed over me when I placed it over my chest - I thought the nightmare was over - but my sense of relief was abandoned seconds later when I was shocked again. At that point, most of my family was in the room trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

We only lived a few blocks from the hospital, so they lifted me up from the bed to help me get dressed before leaving. As I went to put on my coat, I was shocked again. At that point, I had placed 2-3 magnets over my chest but something was wrong and the magnets weren't working. I knew this probably wasn't going to stop and we needed help. My siblings watched in horror as my parents walked me down our sidewalk to the truck. Each time the ICD went off, I let out a toe-curling scream and my body would crumble. I remember trying to step into the backseat, but the sheer force of another shock pushed me face-forward on my stomach. The pain was so intense that I started to black out. I was shocked a few more times on the way to the hospital and almost lost consciousness with each one. My dad drove like a madman to the emergency room where we were greeted by two nurses with a gurney.

As they rushed me inside, I was begging for relief, saying, "Please just put me to sleep." But a nurse turned to me and said, "I'm sorry. We can't do that because you're pregnant." However, it didn't take long for the staff to realize I needed something to make me drowsy - something to help with the pain. Then, they called the only defibrillator technician within a 50-mile radius who had the ability to turn the damn thing off. While we waited for him to arrive, the shocks continued every few minutes - each time, I would cry in pain and my body would bend and flex out of

shape. I bit my tongue several times and remember tasting the blood in my mouth. I had never felt pain like that in my entire life. I just wanted relief so so badly.

When the ICD tech arrived, he opened what I call the "suitcase". They used that system since I was 13 to read the data on my device, adjust settings, turn it on and off, check battery life, etc, but even the tech couldn't seem to get a reading on it. By the time he gained control of my ICD, the battery was nearly depleted and I had been electrocuted dozens and dozens of times. After the ICD was shut off, I was taken by ambulance to a different hospital.

The next morning, I woke up confused and disoriented. Panic set in when I looked to my left and saw this purple log attached to my body - it was my arm swollen and discolored as a result of the electrical shocks. I could barely move it. I couldn't even clench my fist. I suddenly realized it wasn't just my arm that could be injured. What about my baby? I called for the nurse anxiously to know if my daughter was okay. I had just been shocked by a defibrillator inside my body and I had no idea what that might do to an unborn child. The nurse let me listen to her heartbeat, reassuring me that she was alive and well.

Soon afterward, the cardiac team came to speak with me about what had happened and how that was even possible. They disclosed that had I not been pregnant, I would likely not have survived the incident - my heart would have been irreversibly damaged by the electrical shocks. However, because I was pregnant, I had a nice protective cushion of water weight surrounding my nerves and organs. This tiny badass had, in a way, saved my life. They still didn't know why my ICD did what it did, but there was a recall on my particular model and the damn thing needed to come out, which meant a new one had to go back in. So, that was incredibly difficult. I lived in fear every day of something like this happening again. I'm glad I didn't refuse a new ICD simply because, later in life, I would experience cardiac arrest more than once and the ICD save me each time.

I was discharged from the hospital a day or two later. I wanted to be home so badly. As soon as my dad pulled into our driveway, my body started to shake. I felt dizzy and I choked back tears at that time. I didn't understand why this was happening. Later, I learned that this was PTSD. When the front door opened, I saw my mom and sister standing there, which pushed my emotions over the edge. I let go of everything I had been holding in and melted into my mom's arms.

Over the next several months, my body was recovering beautifully. However, it didn't take long for me to realize I was letting fear keep me from living my life. I didn't want my trauma to have control over my happiness. So, I started EMDR therapy. After a handful of sessions, I was already doing much better. I felt guilty because I knew that night had left my family traumatized as well. They were all affected by what they saw and felt. I will never really know what it was like for them, but I do know they're incredibly strong, resilient people and I've been privileged to hear their experiences anytime they've been willing to share. I don't necessarily know if I believe that everything happens for a reason, but I do believe in the strength and resilience of the human spirit. By telling this story, I hope it helps my family further process what took place, I hope it helps those listening who may have suffered trauma and are considering EMDR therapy and, lastly, I hope it reminds people that trauma doesn't deserve to control our happiness and it most certainly doesn't have to.