

Episode 129: Sally watched her house burning

Content warning: this episode includes discussion of suicide.

I had a scary experience with fire when I was a kid.

I grew up in Ohio, in a little town called Westerville. At the time I was probably around 12 or 13. This was on a Saturday, and I was hanging out with some of my friends from around the neighborhood. We were just doing stuff that kids do, mostly setting up ramps and jumping our bikes over them.

At some point we were walking around, in kind of a wooded area. Not the deep forest, but we were kind of off by ourselves, out of the sight of any adults. One of the guys had brought a lighter, and he was just flicking it, finding little sticks to light on fire. I guess as a pre-teen boy this is pretty fascinating. And it also had that little element of excitement, because we all knew this was something we really weren't supposed to be doing.

Eventually he had a few sticks on fire, which he was holding, and when the flames got big he kind of panicked and dropped them. Of course, that meant the dry grass on the ground caught fire and all of a sudden things were starting to get out of control.

But fortunately, the rest of us didn't panic like he did. We all got together and stomped out the flames before they got very big. We were just stupid kids and we were lucky the situation didn't turn into a huge problem.

My guest today is Sally. She experienced a house fire when she was young, and it was a scary experience that changed her life. Because on the day of the fire, Sally lost more than just her house.

Scott

What kind of work did your dad do?

Sally

He was an electrician. He was actually, like, working different jobs throughout his life. When I look back on things, the main idea of his job was always electrician - whether it was, like, maintenance or whatever.

Scott

How would you describe your family when you were a child?

Sally

In my immediate family, it was me, my parents - my mom and my dad - and my older brother who is five years older. We lived in a small house in the Bay Area. It was a Christian home. My mom's family was actually super involved in our lives and super close in proximity. Everyone lived within, like, five minutes of each other. I think that really played a big part in my upbringing too because my grandparents were always around. My aunt and uncle were always going to church. I mean, it was a loving home, for sure. It was just the four of us.

Scott

So it was a very family-oriented atmosphere...

Sally

Yes, very much.

Scott

You did a lot of things as a family...

Sally

Yes. When I look back, I think it's probably just because of the dynamics, as I got older. We'd always go camping and things like that with my dad, especially when I was small. As I got older and stuff changed, I remember going on more outings with my mom, her parents, her sister, and that kind of thing. They're just very close, very loving, and very encouraging.

Scott

Now, I understand that family dynamic, kind of, began to shift around the time when you were about 9 years old. What happened then?

Sally

My dad worked as an electrician for a pretty large company. Again, it was in the Bay Area. It was called NUMMI, which stood for New United Motors Manufacturing Incorporated - I think I could have gotten that very wrong, but it was something to that effect. They manufactured Toyotas. It was this huge plant that brought a lot of jobs to the Bay Area and everything like that. One day, I remember coming home from school and he was home, and that was not normal. They told me that he had fallen and hurt his back. As a child, I didn't really think much of it. I just thought, "Oh no. I hope you're okay," and not thinking that it was gonna carry on for years and become such an impactful moment in my life too - especially for my dad. I mean, both my parents and everybody were affected by this,

Scott

Because it caused him to not be able to work anymore, right?

Sally

Correct, yes. He had fallen, I guess, off of a platform at work just onto his back. At that point, I guess it had done something to his discs. I don't fully understand. He had, like, a herniated disc or something - I don't know all the medical terms. Basically, they had diagnosed him as being, like, 70% disabled after that took place. So it definitely prevented him from returning to work anytime soon.

Scott

That's always difficult, especially back during that time and that era, perhaps. The man was the breadwinner and it's kind of something that men would identify with. "Wow. I can't provide for my family anymore..." Did he indicate that he felt that way at all?

Sally

Oh, 100%. Especially our family dynamic - I would say it was very much more on that "traditional" side. My mom stayed home with us. My dad worked and he was the sole provider pretty much in the financial aspect of things. Even then, I knew that it was hard for him. Of course, looking back and being able to really think about it, I know that was a huge portion of his

struggles mentally and emotionally. Like, what good am I now that I can't do anything, for the most part?

Scott

Not to mention— was he in pain from his injuries? Did that continue?

Sally

Yes. Generally, he couldn't sit for a long period of time. He couldn't stand for a long period of time. He had lots of medications to try to cope with that, which led to more issues too. I was speaking with my brother recently, just, kind of, going over things, and how he remembered different times that we had. He had brought up something that I had forgotten too that, like, at one point, my dad couldn't even stay awake. You'd be talking to him and he'd just fall asleep. I was like, "Wow. I totally forgot how many medications and everything that he was on to try to just, like, mask the pain." It was a lot.

Scott

Yeah. That's a lot to deal with, not just for him but for the whole family.

Sally

Right.

Scott

What happened when you were 11?

Sally

Obviously, it had been a few years since he had fallen. Within that time, again, he was prescribed lots of medication and there were lots of emotions and uncertainties. I think my mom was working - doing some kind of, like, decorating business - I believe at that time to bring in money. Things were just stressful. My dad's sense of purpose-- all of that was, kind of, slowly but surely crumbling away. Again, I was a child. I knew things were tense at home, but I didn't truly think much of it.

I also do want to point out too that, as a child, I was a daddy's girl - if you could ever know one. He would help me set up my Barbie toys and things like that. So I always grew up loving my dad and wanting to hang out with him and things like that. It's kind of off-topic, but I remember walking-- it was, like, an open house at my elementary school. I was probably in, like, first grade, maybe. I remember walking down the hall with my dad and I was holding his hand. I remember one of our very loved janitors whom everyone knew and everyone loved had walked by us and he told my dad, "You better soak up these moments. One day, she's not gonna want to do that." I remember thinking, "What is this man talking about? I will never feel that way."

So yeah, going back to where we were at that time-- it had been a couple of years since he had fallen. Things were rocky and he wasn't stable emotionally. He was always, like, in his bedroom. He'd watch tv. The TV was on all hours of the night. He just wasn't comfortable. Yes, I was 11. He had gotten to the point where, I guess, my parents had gotten into a disagreement about something and he was done and decided that things would be better without him.

I was actually across the street at my best friend's house. She was my neighbor. We were playing or something. I remember my mom hollering from my house. She was hollering my name. My brother wasn't home at the time. She was frantic, so I went back over to our house.

Again, I guess my parents had gotten into a disagreement and my mom found his pills. He had just taken all of his sleeping pills and locked himself in his bedroom, so she was panicking. That's the moment when I came back. So she called 911. I remember speaking to 911 for a minute. Again, my brother wasn't home, so it was just me and my mom at that moment. I remember very vividly, at that time, kind of, like, shutting off my own panic and feeling like, "Okay, got to stuff it down right now. Like, got to take care of this. Mom needs me. I got to handle this. No one else is here."

Scott

I find it so incredible that you took on that role when you were only 11.

Sally

Yeah, I don't know how. I can see us in the living room and feel that, and I really think it had been just everything leading up to it really. I mean, my mom also struggled with anxiety. So I was very keen as a child and still am to this day. I'm very aware of people's body language and, like, the slightest change in mood. I'm like, "Uh-oh. What's wrong? Tell me. I know something's wrong." I think that's also due to trauma. I think that is, like, the effects of it.

Scott

I'm just thinking from your standpoint as a child - what a heavy burden to know that your two parents are at home, but you're the one that has to, kind of, be the calm one in this situation.

Sally

Yeah, it's a lot, I guess. I did take on the role of, like, caretaker too. I was very wanting to make sure everything was okay, especially after this. It was a lot just trying to keep that family peace. As a child, wanting that easy, fun time but it wasn't really there, so—

Scott

You said your dad was locked in the bedroom...

Sally

Apparently, he wouldn't let my mom in. I was able to go in, so it wasn't locked, but they were at it. When I say "They were at it", I think they had gotten into an argument. It wasn't physical. They had never gotten into, like, physical abuse or anything like that. They just argued. They weren't saying eye-to-eye. Again, the stress was high overall.

Scott

When you came in the front door, when you came into the house, your mom was already on the phone with 911. Obviously, you knew something was really wrong here before she even told you.

Sally

Yes.

Scott

What did you do at that point?

Sally

I just remember standing there at that moment. "Okay, I've got to get it together and be strong" kind of came over me. Then, the dispatcher told her to ask me to check and see if he was trying

to end his life. So my mom passed on that information to me. Of course, I was in that mindset of like, "Okay, we got to take care of this." So I just went on into his bedroom and it was dark. I remember it was dark in there. He turned off the lights. All three of our dogs at the time were in there. The TV was off. He was just laying. The fan was on. I remember I walked in and I was like, "Dad." He was laying in bed and I was like, "Are you trying to end your life?" I just remember that he was already drowsy at that point and he nodded "Yes."

The next thing I remember is my grandpa, actually. My mom must have been able to contact her parents. My grandpa came in and had to, like, pull me off of my dad because I was, like, shaking him on top of him, kind of, not like CPR. I was just 11 and trying to wake him up. So I just remember him pulling me off of him. Then, the paramedics came in and took him away. They were able to give him, like, charcoal - I guess that's what they do to, like, pump his stomach to help him vomit up everything. So, I know they were able to do that. The one thing that stood out to me, though, is the feeling of-- I had that strong feeling of needing to get it together and, like, be strong.

Then, after, I remember a very strong sense of, "Okay, I can't trust him." I put that wall up so quickly. I no longer felt like a daddy's girl. I was scared. I loved him, but I was hurt and like, "Did I not do something good enough for him to want to stay? What was it?" So, yes, he survived it, but there was a lot of questioning and pain afterwards as well.

Scott

From a psychological standpoint, it kind of makes sense that if he can so easily make this decision to leave his family, how could you trust him after that - right?

Sally

Right.

Scott

Did any of your friends know that this happened? Did the neighbor-friends see the ambulance come or anything?

Sally

Actually, that's a good point. I'm sure they did, but I don't really remember. I know I never said anything. It was, like, silence after that. It was like my big dark secret. I remember going to school and it was nothing. I didn't speak of it even to my cousins who were, like, my best friends. I don't remember telling them anything - none of us did. It wasn't a sad thing to not speak of it, but it was almost just like this family shame - like, "Let's try to save name and keep it here. We're trying to deal with it. No one needs to know." Obviously, my grandparents knew my close family, so I'm sure my cousins might have known - I don't know. I never said a word. Even to my friend across the street-- who knows what I said? I imagine just brushing it off and being like, "Oh, my dad got sick." I don't know.

Scott

Boy, if there's ever a situation where family counseling for all of you would've helped just to talk about it...

Sally

Yeah. Well, we actually did. Again, it wasn't really pleasant because, I mean, obviously, my dad was in a state of mind where he had wanted to end his life. Now, he's living with life after that

and still struggling and still dealing with all these things. Now, all of us are also struggling with the fact that he wanted to do that. The whole situation— you couldn't get out of it. Our home just felt like it was so chaotic inside, even though there was so much love. Obviously, we wanted to make it work, but it was hard.

We did go to counseling. I remember, all the time after that, if anything happened, I'd be like, "Mom, can we call Dr. So-and-so so he can talk to dad?" And she'd be like, "Well, Sally, I think your dad needs to talk to him." He was, like, my savior at that time. Like, "Okay, maybe he's gonna make it better - this doctor, this psychologist." I think it helped us probably process it a little bit, but it didn't last very long.

Scott

That's a pretty big dark secret for a preteen or teenager to carry around all the time.

Sally

Yeah. It really makes you think, like, "You never know what kids are going through or what anyone's going through or just trying to get through day by day."

Scott

The teen years are stressful enough without adding something like this into it. So that story was really, kind of, just to set up the story of what we're talking about today. If we fast forward a few years, you're 18. What was your relationship with your dad and your mom like at that time?

Sally

My mom and I are so close. We're, like, very similar as well. We talk the same. I just loved her to pieces. At that time, it kind of felt like she was almost like a single mom. She did everything with my brother and I. She would take us to places and all of that. So we were very close. We leaned on each other a lot. Again, things were still stressful. I was also a teenager. So during those years leading up to being 18, I was not only, like, dealing with our home life and trying to deal with being a teenager and "rolling my eyes" - like, my dad would love to lecture me. Now, I look back on those with a smile, but "Oh, it was so annoying. Oh my gosh. Why are you telling me these things like, 'Okay, be careful out there.?' " Just being a dad in that sense. So I just did not want to really be around him all that much.

At one point - I don't know how old I was - he was like, "I don't know how to - I don't know if he said - talk with me or connect with me. You're getting older." I remember thinking, "Oh, you're just so annoying. Like, stop." At 18, again, I loved him and I wished things were different, but it just felt like he was always there. That was actually something I spoke with a pastor when I was younger, and he was like, "Well, tell me something you know about your dad." I was, like, getting some counseling from him and I was like, "Well, he's always there. He never leaves because he couldn't go anywhere. He'd just be in his room on the bed, he was always there, but he wasn't emotionally or mentally— I think he tried but I feel like I needed more time being a teenager.

Scott

It was a Saturday night when you were out with your friends, and you were out pretty much all night...

Sally

Yes. Again, I was 18 - just turned 18. I turned 18 in September and I had just graduated high school. I was working at a grocery store and I still remember, like, getting off of my— I think I was bagging. The “Courtesy Clerk” is the name. I was, like, the bagger. I bagged groceries. So I got off of that job and went out to my best friend's house. We were finally hanging out with these guys that we thought were the coolest thing. They were having, like, a house party. We didn't really do a whole lot of party kind of things at that age. So we just drove around most of the time and just had fun. So that felt like we were being, like, cool. So we went there that night, hung out, and I never, like, went back to sleep. We might have gone back to her house, but I never changed out of my clothes from that day. Like, we were just out.

From my house to her house was kind of a drive - I think it was, like, 40 minutes - so I went to her house, like, every weekend. We always hung out and we still always hang out. She's like my sister, basically. I remember leaving that morning in my same outfit, of course. I was leaving because I was gonna go to church. Church was every Sunday. I didn't want to miss it but I was, of course, exhausted.

Scott

I got to ask you that. It seems like a weird contrast that you are out all night Saturday partying, but then you felt obligated to go to church on Sunday morning. It's like, “Okay, I'm gonna be a rebellious teenager for a while, but now I'm gonna go to church.”

Sally

Yeah. I will say, though, us “partying”-- I don't think it was literally us just being somewhere - like, we didn't drink anything, but we felt like we were.

Scott

You were Christian partiers?

Sally

Yeah, yes. We were just trying to be cool and whatever. I mean, it was that sense of like, “Okay, I need to, like, get back to my roots” kind of thing - like, back to church. I loved church - I really did - but, again, I think it was that dynamic of, like, being a teenager as well. Like, it was very much ingrained in me and still is - that my faith is, like, so important to me. But also, I was a teenager and I wanted to, like, have fun and to hang out with these guys that we thought were the coolest things.

Scott

So you got back home early in the morning on Sunday...

Sally

Yes. I would say it was, like, around 8. It was, like, the most beautiful morning - I don't know why I remember that, but I do. I solely remember, like, driving, the sky was so blue, and it was so beautiful. I got back home around 8 o'clock. My mom was getting ready. My dad, of course, was still in his bedroom. The TV was going. We actually had just gotten a puppy, so I said “Hi” to the dogs. We had one dog - it was a Basset Hound named Bubba, and he had one eye at the time. He was an older dog and we had just gotten this puppy. Anyways, I had gotten in. My mom was getting ready. I remember thinking, like, “My actual eyeballs were, like, burning because I had not slept. I am so tired. I just want to go to bed.” But I felt like, “No, I'll go to church.” I want to go but I played with the idea of just staying home and sleeping. My mom ended up leaving and so I was the last one there, aside from my dad. Again, he was still in his bedroom. I think he was

sleeping. I closed all the doors because, again, we had this puppy and we wanted to make sure that he wouldn't get into anything.

I had that moment of like, "Ugh, should I say bye to my dad?" because I was driving my own vehicle. I actually had his— it was, like, a 91 Ford Bronco, and that was my favorite vehicle I have ever had. It was so fun. It was actually his. He had gotten it new. Anyways, I was driving that. So I had to drive myself to church and I had that moment of like, "Should I say goodbye?" And I was like, "No, I do not want to hear it. I don't know if he'll know that I was in the same outfit from the night before." I still hadn't changed at that point, so I was like, "No, I am not in the mood." So I left and went to church with my mom.

Scott

Just a practical question, were you able to stay awake during the church service?

Sally

I remember that my eyes were heavy. I was a sleepy person to begin with - oh, I could sleep anywhere, anytime - so yes. That day, I was tired. I just couldn't wait to get back home and, like, crawl into bed after church. I got through church. I think we had gone to the early service, so we were done a little bit before, like, lunchtime for us. So we headed back again. My church was really, really close to where I lived. I would say it was, at the most, a 10-minute drive, so it wasn't very far. I remember I was kind of following my mom - like, not directly behind her, but she was ahead of me - and we were heading back home.

My brother was married and his wife was pregnant. My sister-in-law was pregnant at the time, so he wasn't living at home at that time. So it was just me and my mom that was living there. I was following her home and I still remember where I was when she called me on my little flip phone. She called me and she said, "Sally, our house is on fire! Our house is on fire!" And I was like, "What?! What are you talking about?!" I remember my stomach, like, dropping. I was on this residential street and I was next to this one church. I was behind this man where I just needed to turn left at the stop sign. I was waving my arms. I was honking. He probably thought I was a lunatic. Like I was in such a panic at that moment, thinking, like, "What is going on? Our house is on fire? It's not something you really think happens."

So, I went down. I finally was able to turn left. There was a street that ran parallel with these railroad tracks that our street was off of and the speed limit was 25, maybe 30, but I was going 70 on that road in my Bronco. I think my brother had called me at some point in that small time and he was like, "Sally, you need to just drive carefully. Be safe." Again, it wasn't a long drive. I was going so fast, so I got there pretty quickly. My house was probably four blocks away from the end of the street.

When I arrived at the street that we lived on, it was already blocked off by tons of police cars. People were all outside of their houses - all the neighbors and people I didn't really know because they were so far from our house. Everyone was outside of their houses and I couldn't turn down that street, so I remember just slamming my Bronco into park and it, like, lurched forward. I jumped out of the car. I don't even know if I turned off my Bronco. I just jumped out of the car and I started running down the street towards my house. It was, like, 4 or 5 blocks of running and I dropped something. To this day, I don't know what it was or if a neighbor picked it up. Like, I dropped something I don't know. I have no idea if it was, like, a key chain. I was just running. You could see all the fire trucks. There were about 5 firetrucks. Our house was on a corner, so they were, kind of, all around there.

I finally made it to where I saw my mom and she was standing on another block. It was, like, maybe, a block away from our house. She was standing with a police officer. As soon as I got to them, I collapsed. I think, maybe, my adrenaline was going at that point. The cop helped me, kind of, like, walk across the street. My mom was crying. All the neighbors were outside. By that time, I believe my brother and his wife - my sister-in-law - were there. The firemen were doing their thing but the house-- I knew the fire had been mostly put out by the time we arrived because there was no longer any dark, thick, black smoke. It was now mostly, like, a light gray turning into white. So I knew, "Okay, fire's out, but my dad wasn't there."

Me and my mom were taken to the house directly across the street from ours - they were good friends and good neighbors too. They had brought out a couple of chairs for me and my mom to sit on. I don't know if I was crying. I think I was really in shock. My sister-in-law was, kind of, hunched down next to me in the chair and she would be trying to, like, keep my gaze. She'd be like, "Sally, look at me. You're okay. It's okay. We're together." I just was so not there mentally - like, I was in shock. I don't know how else to explain it. It was a different experience. I never felt that.

Scott

Your dad was still in the house this whole time...

Sally

Yes. We were very close. We were across the street, so I'm sure there were firemen or officers that were around, probably, like, relaying information as to, like, the status and stuff. We were just basically just sitting there waiting. They ended up carrying our dogs out because, on the weekend, we had Bubba, our one-eyed Basset Hound. We had him and then we had Charlie, our puppy. They had laid them. The firemen were able to get them out and lay them on the front lawn.

I remember seeing Charlie and he was as stiff as could be, as sad as that is. I mean, that's what it looked like. I could tell there was no life in him. Actually, Bubba, the dog, just lived through everything. They gave him oxygen - the firemen gave him oxygen - and were able to save him. So, he was not, like, back to normal. I remember seeing him and being like, "Okay, Bubba's alive. It's okay."

Scott

I can't help but wonder-- this just seems so odd. The firemen are going to rescue the dogs. Did they even know your dad was in there?

Sally

They did. They were able to make contact. Like, they were able to find him again. We had a really small house. I think it was, like, 900 square feet, so everything was right there. We just had, like, a kitchen, a living room, and then the bedrooms were right there. The fire had started in the kitchen, so that's where the flames were. The flames were in the kitchen in that area. My parents' master bedroom was on the backside of the kitchen, so the wall between their bedroom and the kitchen was a shared wall. They were able to find him. He was in the bedroom on the floor. But at that time, my dad had been - what, almost 10 years of him being disabled - not able to do anything. He had gained a lot of weight, so he is a bigger guy. He was probably around, like, 400 pounds at that time. Our house was really small and the furniture in their bedroom was really large - like, heavy wooden furniture. So I guess the firemen were just struggling. They

couldn't get him physically out. The fire was out at that point, but they couldn't move him because of the placement of where he was. He was in between the bed and the window on the floor, but there were, like, dressers that were in the way and couldn't fit him through. So they had to move furniture, I guess, and make room so they could actually lift and carry him out.

Scott

You were watching this happen. Did you see them bring him out of the house as you were across the street?

Sally

Yes. We saw them carry him out - couldn't really tell much. It took about-- I don't know how many of them. There were a lot of them because, again, he was a bigger man and he wasn't conscious, so he wasn't moving. He couldn't walk.

Scott

But was he still alive at that time?

Sally

Yes, he was still alive when they found him. He was still breathing, but he wasn't conscious at all. He was breathing and he had a pulse, so they literally, like, put him in the ambulance and they were off. The next thing I remember was going to the hospital. We weren't told anything prior. They were just like, "Yeah, we probably need to go there and see how he is doing, and then we would come back to the house and deal with that stuff after."

We got to the hospital and I remember having a gross feeling just because it wasn't our normal hospital. They took him to, like, a different one. I was like, "This is weird," because I feel like my grandparents, my aunt or my cousins always need to go in for something when something is always happening. We were a close family, so anytime anybody went to the doctor, we were all there. So I remember thinking, like, "Ew, why is he at this weird hospital that none of us know? I don't like it." Again, that wasn't my main concern, but I just remember slightly having that feeling of, like, walking in and being so unfamiliar. It felt like such foreign territory and didn't feel, like, safe.

It was just my mom, my brother, my sister-in-law, and my grandpa - my mom's dad. I believe a nurse took us to this one portion of the hospital. I remember it was very empty in that portion. There were, like, some exam rooms to the side, and then they had these other very small private waiting rooms. They had our family go into that. I mean, it felt like a closet. It was very tiny. There were just, like, maybe, 4 chairs in there. It was just a very small square - no windows, just a small box of a room. So we all just sat in there. Eventually, a doctor came in and they had someone else with them. Of course, now, I know it was probably a social worker. They told us that they tried everything and they weren't able to save him - she didn't say it in those words specifically. There was a moment - a millisecond - where I thought she was saying that he was okay. From however she worded that, I was thinking, "Oh, he's okay."

But then they said, "No, he died." I just remember everyone, kind of, wailing. I immediately, like, threw myself on the floor. I didn't even think twice. It just happened suddenly. I was on my knees on the floor just crying and in disbelief, basically. It was just so, so surreal at that moment.

Scott

Yeah. It's a whole flood of various emotions when you get news like that.

Sally

Yeah, definitely.

Scott

Do they know how the fire started?

Sally

Yes.

Scott

Was this another potential suicide attempt again? What happened?

Sally

That was something that I had, kind of, thought about, but they actually did do an inspection, of course, as they would, and they had found that there was some kind of - I don't even know what to call it - like, a connection blew or something in the wall. It was an electrical fire. Apparently, my dad - which kind of made me wonder because he wasn't really a big coffee drinker - but decided to make a pot of coffee that day. Again, he was on tons of medication and could fall asleep at the drop of a hat just from everything he was on. I think he was even given methadone at one point just for his pain and everything and, that's very strong, from my understanding. So he had put on this pot of coffee. I guess, the water was running - something was said about the water running - and he had gone back to the bedroom and fallen asleep.

He never put any water in the coffee pot or anything, so that sparked a fire because, I guess, it was running without anything in it. My mom had shared with me that, I didn't realize, three weeks prior, they had just gotten our house rewired. Of course, my dad's an electrician, so he could have done it, but his health was not allowing him, so they hired somebody to rewire our house. Everything was in proper working order. Like, it shouldn't have happened, but I guess it was due to him not filling up that coffee pot and falling asleep - I will say the fire alarms too. We did not have working fire alarms in our home.

To this day, if I hear or notice anybody talk about, like, "Ugh, we need to put that up?" I'm like, "No, you really should." I don't know how much that would've helped, but I imagine it would've done something to help wake him out of his sleep. But we didn't have that so he was able to just sleep through it. He was never burned when they did the autopsy. It was found that he died of smoke inhalation.

Scott

In the months and the years that followed, how did it affect you and your family?

Sally

It was hard, I will say. After they told us, we were let in to see him that day in the hospital, and then they'd let us go back and see him. Of course, he was just lying on the operating table, I guess. I remember leaving that room and going to one of those empty, like, exam rooms and I just remember sitting on the bed. It was dark in there. It has nothing - just a very empty portion of the hospital. I remember thinking, "I was the worst daughter." Like, the voice in my mind was like, "I was a horrible daughter. I didn't say goodbye. I didn't treat him the best that I could have treated him." Also, it took me years to be able to admit it, but I had a sense of relief. It sounds

horrible for someone who maybe didn't or hasn't gone through anything like that. It might be very hard to understand, but there was that complex amount of feelings that I was able to feel this great sorrow and guilt, but also a sense of relief as well because our lives had been so chaotic and he was in so much pain. I was also scared. I remember driving over to the hospital thinking like, "If he makes it, what's it gonna be like as he's already in such a bad place?" It was definitely hard. We actually ended up moving into my grandpa's house - me and my mom. Again, my brother and his wife were living in an apartment at that time, but me and my mom stayed with my grandpa, who was also living with my aunt, uncle, and cousin in a small house that was five minutes from our house.

Scott

Well, you said you were very family-oriented.

Sally

Right. Yeah. Honestly, at that time, there were six of us in that house and one bathroom. I never remember any issues with, like, sharing the bathroom or anything like that, and it was really special. I mean, of course, like everything, we had just been, like, uprooted from our home. We had to, like, go pick up clothes that day. We were living out of, like, bins that we could fit in the bedroom we were staying in, but it was a really special time to be together, have that healing time together, and have just the support and the love. I think that really was a huge part of getting through it.

Scott

There's something about a group of people, whether it's a family or even any other group. When you have a shared big experience, it bonds people in some way.

Sally

Yeah, for sure. I definitely think so because you're able to lean on each other and there's this just, like, common bond, really.

Scott

I understand you were diagnosed with PTSD at some point after this.

Sally

Yes. The healing process - as I feel like for everyone that goes through anything - is definitely not a straight line. It's years of ups and downs. Initially, right after the fire, I did not go to therapy. I actually ended up just getting, like, counseling through my pastor at that time, which was a huge help for me. I mean, that's like therapy in a sense. I was able to, like, voice my pains, my fears, and all of that, so that was very helpful. I eventually ended up in college. They offered free counseling and therapy, so I would say that is when I really started my deep dive into understanding myself and getting healing from all of that - my childhood and the different traits that I had picked up along the way. Eventually, I would say I was probably in therapy for at least 5 years. I mean, often on, I would say, maybe, like, 7 years or maybe more.

I think a lot of stuff came up after I graduated college. I think, maybe, I was so focused in college - it was so structured - and I was able to keep my mind busy and it was, like, my main focus for 4 years. I think, after that was when things, kind of, came to a head. I was in my twenties and I was just really, like, learning who I was and understanding why I was the way I was. So, yeah, I was eventually diagnosed with PTSD, and that was really hard for me. I never

wanted to tell anybody because I was like, "Oh my gosh, that doesn't happen to normal people. That's just for, like, a soldier overseas."

Scott

Yeah, there's a stigma.

Sally

Yeah, for sure. It's not normal, but it's a common diagnosis. I now work in a mental health field and I see it all the time, and it's awful, but your body has to process things somehow. Sometimes, it comes through traumatic situations in different ways.

Scott

You indicated that you felt guilty because, that Sunday morning, you thought about opening the door and saying goodbye to your dad, but you decided not to. How do you think your life after the fire would've been different if you had opened that door and said goodbye to him?

Sally

I don't know. I will say that I did think about that and have thought about that a lot over the years - just thinking about all of the what-ifs. What if I had stayed home and taken a nap? Could I have helped him? Would I have been able to get us out if I was more awake than him or whatever? I think, of course, the thought of like, "Always tell your loved ones you love them comes to mind." is so true. I say "I love you" to my fiance all the time. I say it to all my friends and my family because I want them to know, for sure, without a doubt that I love them and, kind of, just like making sure I know that I do my part and not regret it. But that day-- I don't know that it would've changed a lot because I think I still would've felt guilt for our relationship at the time and the pain that he was experiencing.

I think I still would've dealt with everything in a similar way, but maybe just not have that initial guilt of, "Oh, I didn't say goodbye." It's given me a lot of grace for myself. If anybody is, like, regretting how they acted in a certain situation or how a relationship went or something, I'm like, "You've got to remember that you—" Like me, for instance, at that time, I was surviving. We all were surviving. My dad was doing the best that he could in the ways that he thought he could. I was doing the same as a teenager. There was a lot on all of our plates. To have grace looking back on my 18-year-old self knowing, like, "Hey, you were okay. You were doing okay. You just can't beat yourself up for what happened because you have to remember the situation too." Like, yeah, I wish things had been different, but I don't want to carry that shame or that guilt because, again, we all were doing the best we could. It was just an unfortunate and hard situation that I'm sure my dad did not want any part of, but this is the saying, "The cards that were dealt to him..."

Scott

That's just life.

Sally

Yeah, exactly. As unfair as it can be.

Scott

Is there any part of this that we haven't talked about that you want to mention?

Sally

I do. I was thinking, kind of, a cool, weird thing - I don't know. I guess, like, a lot of times, people say that after they lose someone, there might be, like, a bird or a butterfly that they see that reminds them.

Scott

It's always a butterfly, right?

Sally

Yes. And again, I did years of therapy and finally came to a place where I was no longer angry with my dad. I felt like if I saw him, I truly, truly, truly believe that there would just be love there, no guilt and no shame for both of us. I'm sure. I can't speak for him, really, but imagining what he felt throughout his life— I'm sure he held a lot of guilt as well from not being able to be who he wanted to be. I feel like there's just so much healing there. My dad was a very stoic kind of guy. Like, he was serious. He had his goofy side, but he wasn't a loud person. He was very quiet.

I just find it funny because the date of the fire and his death was October 22nd. Again, I was 18. I had just graduated high school, so I had started going to our community college in the area. It was actually my first visit there. Again, it was probably the next few months after the fire when I was at the library. Outside of the library at this college, they had police officers just to help with theft and stuff like that, I'm sure. I walked up and it was the same officer that had helped carry me across the street. I didn't know if he remembered me, but he did. I talked with him and he was like, "Well, here, you need a locker to put your purse and belongings in before you go into the library." So he gave me a locker, and the locker number was 1022. So it was at 1022, and I was like, "It's so weird." I remember, like, going home and telling everybody. Throughout my life, since then, if I pick up my phone - it happened this morning - I won't have my phone with me, I'll pick it up. What time is it? It's 10.22 right on the dot. Every time I see 10-22, whether it's a locker number, the time of day, or an address, I'm like, "Okay dad, I love you. You're there." Yeah, it's just like a cool little thing, just kind of, like, me showing the redemption of the situation, I guess. Yeah. It just reminds me of God's faithfulness.

Through this, just being able to be on the other side - unfortunately, my dad isn't here - I rest in the fact that he is no longer hurting, his life still had purpose, and he was still so loved and so worthy of love. I'm grateful that I had the 18 years, even as rocky as they were in those last few years. I'm thankful I had them. A lot of people don't even have a dad from year one, so I'm thankful for that and for just the whole experience. I wouldn't have said that right after the fire. I remember wishing and praying, and was like, "I can't wait till it's three years later because, maybe, by then, I'll feel better." Now, it's been 16 years and the pain is still there. I still miss him. I still think about the what-ifs, but there's been healing and there's hope after trauma. I truly believe there's always somebody that maybe you don't know yet, but that has been there too and understands to an extent, and I find a lot of comfort in that myself.

Scott

I wanted to tell you about a couple of things before we close out this episode.

At this point I have lots of guests and stories in the works. In the beginning, in the first couple of years doing this show, I had to always go searching for stories. Well, not anymore. I do still keep an eye out for crazy stories that might be in the news, but most of the stories I get now actually come from listeners. This podcast has been downloaded more than 6 million times now, so the listening audience has grown really big, and so I get new story submissions all the time from people who listen to the show. Which is great! Now I just need to figure out how to have 36

hours in a day so I can keep up with it. But believe me, there are some great stories coming your way.

There is one guest in particular who I've been looking for, for a couple of years now. This is a young lady who appeared on a TV show called The Carbonaro Effect. All I know is that her first name is Genesis, and she probably lives in the Chicago area. If you have any ideas about how to track down this person, I'd love to hear from you. You can email me for more details.

And if you happen to be a Reddit user, you're welcome to join the What Was That Like subreddit. We just hit 500 people in that group. There's usually some discussion about each episode of the podcast. But for the more in-depth conversations about the show, where everyone talks about what they were thinking as they listened to the story, that happens in the Facebook group. LOTS of discussions over there.

And we do talk about things other than the podcast. I recently posted this question in that group. A very simple, seemingly innocent question, I just asked: Do you wear socks to bed? And wow, do people have something to say about that. For some people, it's "yeah, I always wear socks in bed." But other people were like "Socks in bed? No way, I'm not a psycho!" I never would have thought this would be such a lively topic, but it's definitely fun seeing the responses. So come on over and join us – [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook).

All right, it's Listener Story time! If you're new to the show, every episode of What Was That Like ends with a story that's been sent in by a listener. It can be happy, sad, funny, it just needs to be something interesting that happened to you that you can tell in about 5 minutes. If you have a story you want to tell, record it on your phone and email it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

In this story, we hear about a scary experience in Hawaii.

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

(Listener Story)

In the early 1990s, I lived in Hanalei, Hawaii on the island of Kauai. One day, I was foolish enough to let a friend talk me into going boogie boarding with him when I had no business going out there at all. I had no experience with boogie boards or surfing or anything ocean related, and the waves were enormous that day. I mean, these waves were huge. I didn't understand it at that time, but this was also a very, very dangerous shore break. My first clue should have been the fact that we were in Kauai, Hawaii and there wasn't a single surfer out there, but I didn't pick up on that for some reason. My friend explained to me how we could paddle out in the channel and position ourselves perfectly to catch a wave. My decision to go out there with him turned out to be one of the stupidest decisions I've ever made, and it almost cost me my life.

In any case, we paddled out in the channel. Pretty soon, we were out there with these giant waves rolling underneath us. I was facing toward the beach when, suddenly, I heard my friend yelling from 15 or 20 yards behind me, "I'm getting out of here! It's too late for you! You're caught! Paddle as hard as you can and try to ride one in! Hurry!" I looked back and saw him

paddling frantically away from me, leaving me out there alone. Then, I saw what looked like a tsunami headed straight for me and I knew I was in serious trouble.

Terrified. I began to paddle as hard as I could toward the shore, hoping I would somehow be able to ride it and come out of it okay. When the wave got to me, the first thing I remember thinking was how high it was. It felt like it lifted me a hundred feet. I panicked and let go of my boogie board - I was not wearing a leash - and it went crashing down in front of me.

When I came over the falls, I got driven headfirst into the sea floor and was tossed around like a raggedy hand doll. The pain was so intense. I thought it broke my neck. I couldn't figure out which way was up and I couldn't hold my breath for much longer. When I finally came to the surface and got my head above water to take a breath, I was horrified to see the face of an even bigger wave bearing down on me. I was caught in the impact zone and could not have been in a more dangerous situation.

As I got pulverized into the sea floor and tossed around again, I thought I would die, for sure. After getting hammered by a third wave, the whole thing finally ended with me getting washed up on shore, bruised, battered, and crying like a child. Needless to say, I didn't get in the water again for a long time.