

## **Episode 165: Hali was saved by a friend**

James had a childhood that would have indicated future success. He grew up in southern California, and his father is a scientist. His mother is a registered nurse. They lived in an affluent neighborhood in San Diego.

But by the time he was in middle school, James began to display some mental health issues. He tried to take his own life at age 11.

But he did graduate from high school, and also completed a bachelor's degree at the University of California Riverside. He then decided to move to Colorado and work toward a graduate degree in neuroscience. By outward appearances, he seemed to be on the right track.

But he continued to battle depression, and for several years, he was obsessed with the idea of killing. One day, he acted on that obsession. He walked into a movie theater with multiple guns and started firing into the crowd of people watching a movie.

My guest today is Hali. She knows exactly what it's like to be in that situation, to be the target of an active shooter. On that day, in Aurora, Colorado, Hali was in that theater.

---

### **Scott**

You were at the theater on a date with John, and this was your third date in a week. But I remember you had mentioned that you felt like he was almost still a stranger to you. Why is that?

### **Hali**

We met so many people online nowadays, and we had a first date that went really well, but it was initial contact, first meetings, and kind of surface stuff. But it went so well that I said, "Okay, this is my birthday week. I'm having friends over for a game night. I really like this guy. Let me invite him over and throw him to the wolves, so to speak." So that was our second date, but it was also with a crowd of people and public and not the get-to-know-you kind. We were getting to know personalities and things like that, and that went so well that I said, "Okay, I have plans to go to the Dark Knight on my birthday" and I invited him to go with me. It was a midnight showing and he accepted. So here we are on a weekend on our third date. Yes, I barely know him, but I know I like him. I know he's a guy I want to keep getting to know.

### **Scott**

Let's talk about that night then. You got in the actual theater. Can you just kind of describe the layout?

### **Hali**

Very large theater. I think there's maybe 15-16 actual theaters. One thing I didn't kind of realize is there are stairs in the lobby and it's a double-decker type of theater, so it's a big place. So if we go in, on the left and the right of walking into the theater, there's the corridor that takes you to the room that opens up to the screen. There's floor seating and then there's the stadium-type seating that goes all the way up the theater. Big theater - I think it's like 400 people. We came in on the left side of the theater, with the screen being in front of us. As soon as we came in, we turned immediately to the right and started going up those stairs to find our seats. It's packed.

This is back when midnight showings were all the rage. People have on costumes. They're dressed up, going all out.

**Scott**

And this was a big movie too.

**Hali**

Big movie yeah. All the big movies would get midnight showings. That's how you knew it was the biggest thing because people just couldn't wait till the next day to see it. This was a Thursday by the way, and here I am having to work on Friday at a midnight showing on my birthday. True movie goers really get it. If you know, you know. We walked up, probably not halfway but about close to halfway, and we sat at the end seat and the seat next to it. So I'm in the very end seat and John was to my right.

**Scott**

Was that deliberate? I mean, when I go to a movie with my wife, I always like the end seat for some reason. Why did you choose those seats?

**Hali**

Yeah, very good question. I actually usually sit in the middle because, to me, the middle towards the top is my spot, if I can get it. The closer to the screen I am, the dizzier I get. So I don't like being close but I always felt, like, in the middle, you don't have to crane your neck. If I had my way about it, I would have been dead center, but it was just crowded. It was busy. So we're just looking for two seats together that aren't on the floor at this point. I mean, the energy was high. People were not sitting in their seats. They were standing. They were walking around. They were talking. Everybody's looking at costumes. I mean, it was a packed house. So, I think we just picked the seats that were there.

I am 5 feet tall, so reaching the ground is not always comfortable for me. I was sitting Indian-style in my chair. John let me borrow his sweatshirt. I've got that in my lap. It's summer. I've got my flip-flops on, so my flip-flops were on the floor. I'm very cozy eating my candy at this point.

**Scott**

So the movie started and everything seemed normal.

**Hali**

Everything was fine. Everything was normal. It was about 20 to 25 minutes in when I saw—again, I was on the left side of the theater. The screen was in front of us. On the right side near the screen down on the floor is an exit door which, of course, I didn't pay much attention to until that door opened during the very dark scene in the movie. That never happened in my entire life, so it was noticeable because of the light and because it was so dark during the scene in the theater. For anybody that's seen the Dark Knight movie, when this all goes down, Christian Bale's character, the bat, whatever, he's not Batman at the time. He's his own Bruce Wayne. He and his butler, Alfred are in the lair down in the basement in the cave. It's dark. It's very dark. It's one of those scenes where they're looking at computer screens. If you've seen the movie, you'll know exactly that scene. So that's what's going on.

When the door opened, I saw the light and I saw someone walking through. They're in full SWAT gear. There's a face mask. There are pads on the thighs. There are pads on the chest. It looks like someone who is about to perform that kind of raid in the movies, that's what this

person looks like - lots of costumes and stuff. I immediately thought, "Is this part of the movie?" Everything's happening so fast. It's just these immediate thoughts of, "Is this part of the movie?"

Right away, he tossed a canister of something. At that time, I had no idea what it was, but it got smoke coming out of it. I made a motion with my hands as I was doing this because I'll never ever forget that my eyes left him and followed this can of smoke spiraling through the air, and it kind of went up in front of the movie screen. Obviously, gravity started to bring it down and it dropped on the floor, maybe four or five rows in front of me. Me and lots of people sort of were looking and kind of trying to see the canister as if that's going to clarify anything.

Well, while all this was going on, I started to feel funny. I started to be affected by whatever is now in the air from this smoke. My panic immediately set in as to what this smoke was and why it was affecting me, and I was getting very scared of the smoke, essentially. By the way, I found out later that two cans of tear gas were thrown that night. One was tossed in another direction, but I did not see it because my eyes followed the first canister. My eyes actually never went back to him the rest of the time. That was the one and only time I saw him because, then, it was pretty much mayhem.

So John and I were still sitting in our seats. The gas has fallen. It's filling the air. We looked over to our left and-- you know how you're walking upstairs and there's three or four stairs and then a flat platform, and then three or four more stairs and a flat platform? It was like that. On one of those platforms, there was a girl lying in the fetal position because, at this point, I guess people were starting to get up out of their seats and move around and whatever. There's some noise, but I wasn't really registering that. My brain's thinking about the gas and being affected by this gas. We saw this girl lying in that fetal position and there was blood coming out of the side of her neck or her face or somewhere up near her head. She's kind of got her hand over it. This is when John and I realized at the same time, "Holy shit, something's going down. This is not a game. This is not a joke. This is not a costume."

I think probably at that point, my mind started registering that there were gunshots. That's the noise I'm hearing. It's strange because, up until then, I've really only heard gunshots in the movies on the screen, and it doesn't sound anything like that in real life, or at least it didn't inside that theater. So my brain was just not putting two and two together with what I'm hearing and what's happening. It was more so when I saw her lying on the stairs that we started to figure it out. So at that point, John just started telling me to get up, to do something. I was not reacting. I remember him, like, pushing or moving me out of my seat.

**Scott**

You were in the end seat, so he was pushing you toward the aisle.

**Hali**

Exactly.

**Scott**

Toward the stairs, right?

**Hali**

Right.

**Scott**

Okay.

**Hali**

My shoes were on the floor. I had my purse. I had candy. I had his sweatshirt in my lap. So I was kind of fumbling around with my things. I was not really thinking, to be honest. I was just following John's instructions at this point. I don't know if he pushed me onto the ground or told me to get down or whatever but, at that point, we're on the ground. My body was lying face down on the stairs and I was up the stairs. My feet were towards the bottom and my head was towards the top. John was sort of lying over me and had an arm around me. He was literally, like, shielding and protecting me with his body. I could feel him doing that but, at the time, I didn't exactly know what John was doing. I didn't find any of that out till later. It's a very different experience than mine.

What was going through my head as I was lying on the stairs is, "Okay, this person's in here shooting at us, trying to kill us. Why wouldn't he be trying to injure us with this gas that's in the air?" Because at that point, my eyes, my throat, I can barely breathe. It's uncomfortable. It's itchy. It's coughy. I was basically thinking, "I'm being poisoned." My mind just was like, "Breathe into the sweatshirt. Don't breathe as much air as possible." That's really all that's going through my mind. At one point, I remember looking up at John and I don't know why there was this moment, I don't know if there was a break in the shooting and maybe it was a little more silent or something because that did happen - I'll explain that in a second. I just kind of remember looking up at him and I've never felt this vulnerable in my whole life. I was like, "John..." And I just asked him what to do. I was so desperate for his leadership at that point and thank God he was the type of person that provided it.

**Scott**

100% vulnerability.

**Hali**

100%. If you had asked me before, I would have tried to tell you, "This is what I would do. That's what I would do in this situation." It's funny what you think you know about something, and I was just a big old pile of bones that could not think to save my life at that moment.

**Scott**

How long do you think you were on the steps?

**Hali**

It is hard to say because time definitely moved differently for me in those moments. It really felt like a long time but, in retrospect, I believe it was probably 60 seconds, maybe 90 - could have been less. It was not a long period of time, but it felt like a long period of time.

**Scott**

While you're there though, the shots were being fired.

**Hali**

Totally. The whole time. He then kind of said something. I have no idea if he told me with his hands or with his words to get up and we're leaving. I immediately started to go down the stairs because that's the way we came in. Well, John had figured out— again, I don't know if he grabbed me or if he told me to go up or just pulled me and shoved me up the stairs - I'm not sure - but, essentially, he was leading us to an exit that was up the stairs that I was not even

aware of. Me and lots of people from the theater and John were shuffling out. I definitely remember thinking the whole time, "Just please don't shoot me in the back. Please don't get shot in the back. I just don't want to get shot in the back." Like, just imagining that I'm going to get shot in the back on my way out.

One other thing that really stuck out— if this girl hears this podcast, please God, reach out to me. I would love to hear from you of all people ever in the theater. There's one door that is immediate when you're leaving the theater. Then, there's, like, a little alcove thing, like a space between the next door, which actually takes you out into the outside of the theater at the top level, I guess, for light, so you don't open one door and just flood the theater with light. Well, in that space, John and I are finally in there. He was behind me and this girl in front of me turned around and she went, "I forgot my shoes." In my mind, I thought, "Fuck your shoes," but I didn't say anything. I didn't verbalize that. I didn't say to her, "Forget your shoes. Fuck your shoes." Like, she's turning around and acting like she's going back. I did not stop her. I didn't. I don't think I still feel guilty. It's almost just part of the story, but it did make me feel guilty for so many years. Like, why didn't I stop her? Why didn't I help her? Why didn't I say something? I can only hope that she caught herself or somebody else caught her and turned her around.

It's kind of weird how your brain— by the way, as she's saying, "I forgot my shoes," I was carrying my purse, my sweatshirt, and both my flip flops. I have all my things. I don't know how I did that, but I was carrying them out of the theater with me.

**Scott**

If you saw that woman again - you only saw her for a flash - do you think you'd recognize her?

**Hali**

I wouldn't know her. I think I have a vision of her in my mind. Like, race and hair color might be all I had, but I wouldn't know her now and it's 10-plus years ago.

**Scott**

You were in survival mode. You were in sensory overload at this point.

**Hali**

100%.

**Scott**

A lot of stuff could have happened that your brain just blocked out or it's not one of your memories.

**Hali**

Exactly. And I did come to find that, that's very true. At that point, we were on the other side of the door, John was holding my hand, we were going down a staircase, we saw the front doors, we were headed out of them, now we were turning to the right, we're going to the car, John was holding my hand and dragging me the whole way. He was moving faster than me. Again, I have my purse, his sweatshirt, and both my flip-flops in my arms. He was holding my other hand and I was just shuffling along barefoot. I mean, he literally held my hand to safety. We got in his car and we pulled out of the theater parking lot. As we were pulling out, the very first cops and first responders were starting to come in.

**Scott**

This is a little bit of the police radio communications at that time, followed by a short 911 call made from inside the theater.

**911 Operator**

There's a shooting at Century Theaters, 14300 East Alameda Avenue. They're saying somebody is shooting in the auditorium. Units responding to the shooting, switch to or remain on channel 2. Channels back to normal. 315 and 314, we have one person that's been shot, but they're saying there are hundreds of people just running around.

**Male speaker**

(Inaudible)

**911 Operator**

316, okay.

(inaudible)

**911 Operator**

Officers responding to the shooting, 14300 East Alameda Avenue. Somebody is still shooting inside theater number 9.

**Male cop**

I need the ambulance as soon as possible.

**911 Operator**

This reference to the shooting in Aurora.

**Male**

I got hit.

**911 Operator**

You were hit. Do not hang up. I need to bring Aurora on the phone, okay? Do not hang up.

**Male**

Oh my gosh! Ow! I'm bleeding! I'm bleeding! I'm blind!

**911 Operator**

Okay, paramedics' on the line. Hold on just a second.

**Hali**

I live, at this point, maybe 10 minutes from the theater. So it's a very silent car ride home, a very just a stupor type of car ride home. We got there and sat on my couch, and it's more of that. We're just kind of looking around. What do we do? We did try to call 911 and it was this kind of frantic thing on the other side of, "Do you know who the shooter was? Are you injured? Are you okay?" Sort of questions like that. And then, we're at home. We have no idea what happened. They're just like, "Okay, thanks. We're getting calls. Bye." So they got off the phone fairly quickly. I tried to call— the only people I could think of at that time was to call my mom. I have a stepmother who's been in my life since I was three, and I made a call to my mom. I made a call to my stepmom and, strangely enough - shout out to my dad - my dad answered the phone.

It was 3 in the morning on the East Coast. I'm pretty sure my dad knew everything was not fine, but he asked me, "Is everything okay? What's going on?" And I just said, "Everything's fine." And I hung up the phone. At that moment, I couldn't speak the words. I couldn't tell him what was going on and I couldn't imagine talking to anybody but my mom. I think if I had them on the phone, I probably would have just fallen apart because I didn't have the words. So when he asked me, it was like, "No, I can't tell you. I got to go." And I hung up the phone. I always find that a little strange fact.

### **Scott**

Since this happened and you've spoken to your dad, obviously, about it, what was he thinking when you called and then said everything's fine and hung up?

### **Hali**

I don't actually know how he felt about it per se because, in the aftermath of all that, let's say he was upset with me. Would he have told me? No, not then but, knowing my dad, I don't think it bothered him and I think he kind of understood. Sometimes, you just want your mom and that was all that was about, so I do think my dad understood. We slept for a couple of hours. Now, again, mind you, third date, stranger, but here we are, and I was clinging to this man for dear life, and we're spooning, he's holding me. We're both in our clothes from the theater. I realized, when I got home, that there was blood on a flip-flop. I had no idea where that came from or whose blood it was and was just in complete shock.

I am originally from the East Coast and this is happening in Mountain time in Denver. So I started getting calls very early from people on the East Coast who were seeing the news and knew it was my birthday, that know I am a moviegoer who has gone to the movies probably once a week since I could drive. If it's Sunday, where's Hali? She's at the movies - by yourself, with someone, doesn't matter. If it's a big movie coming out, Hali is going to see it. My brother said later, "Before I called you, when I heard Aurora and Batman, I knew you were there because it was your birthday." That's the pattern it was for me to go to the movies, and it was the strangest thing for people to call.

I remember two friends in particular - Kenny and Candace - called and they're like, "I just saw the news and I'm sure you weren't there, but I just had to call and ask." And I had to say, "No, I was there." This precedes the line of questioning that occurred this way for- to this day, when I bring up "I was there", people can't hear it the same way that I can barely believe what I'm saying, and finding the accurate words to express to somebody, like, "No, I was literally-" they're like, "Wait, you were seeing a movie at that movie theater?" I'm like "No, I was in the movie theater. I watched this guy walk in the door and shoot. He was shooting." But saying the words and absorbing those words was like- nobody could believe it. They'd say, "Are you okay?" And I'd say, "I'm physically okay, but I'm not okay." It just was strange conversations.

There were a lot of calls that came that morning. I couldn't even tell you who. I just remember the first two because it was, like, 5 in the morning or something. That's when John and I woke up and we turned on the news trying to start finding information about, "Does anybody know anything yet? What's going on? How many people have been hurt? What's going on?" And I think we stumbled on the TV that they were having everyone that was a victim there to come to this one school and meet there so that they could catalog people because, at this point, if you've driven off, they don't even know you were there. There's no record for buying a movie ticket or there's no roster, so there could be people missing off the list to this day, if they never saw it. Any help or therapy or ask for anything or going to the hospital, they could have just gone home

and that could have been the end of it. So they were sort of calling for people to come and meet at this place.

John made a couple of calls to his family. My family was calling like crazy at that point. That's when I spoke to my mom. That's when I spoke to my brother. Everybody was in shock and disbelief. Then, John and I decided that we needed to separate. He needed to go home. I needed to shower. We've called out of work, of course. We just need to kind of go to our houses and figure out what to do. He did not want to go to the school that they were asking everybody to come to, but I did go there. I'll never remember the ladies' names. I wouldn't know them if I saw them anywhere on the street, but shout out to them too because they really helped me that morning. They helped me understand that almost everything I was feeling was normal for the situation because this was all new to me - that level of shock, that level of guilt, fear just all of it. Then, I immediately felt responsible for John's feelings, what he was feeling, and how he was doing.

**Scott**

And who were these people? Who were these ladies?

**Hali**

They just were, like, some sort of people that volunteered for this. I don't know how they pulled it together so fast - I genuinely don't.

**Scott**

But were they trained counselors who were brought in?

**Hali**

I honestly don't know. I feel like they did have some expertise. I don't think they were just people straight off the street because they really seemed to know about what I was going through. So I felt like maybe there was somebody that had volunteered or somebody that had been called in and there were lots of people there. There was a room that you kind of walk into - a big old room - and you just kind of went to a desk or a chair and then somebody greeted you and you just talked with them. You just told them your experience and what you were going through. I cried with these ladies. They helped me, they comforted me, but then I also went into another room and cataloged my name and my information, and was sort of assigned a number and that was with the police. They were just trying to find out everybody that was there.

At this point, I can kind of only imagine seeing and talking to John, and I was sort of desperate to hang out with John, honestly, because I feel completely safe around him. He's also the only person who understands this crazy thing that I have no idea how to put into words at this point. But then, I also thought about my best friend, Michaela. If I were to go anywhere for support, whenever I'm ready to not be alone, not be on the phone all day long, because I was taking calls all day long and I barely remember any of them.

People told me, like, what we talked about, what we said, and I'm just like, "Oh my God, that's so weird to hear. I wasn't even there for that." I did eventually end up— John needed to do things. He needed to stay with his family. I found out, "Okay, John and I are not getting back together today." I showed up on my friend Michaela's doorstep and she proceeded to basically pick up the muddled pieces the whole weekend. I was in bed. I remember she would ask me questions and everything was— I don't know. She'd say, "Do you want to eat something? I'd say, "I don't know." She'd say, "Well, are you hungry?" I'd be like, "I don't know." Also, the news was



on and this was one of the first really big mass shootings in a place where we all previously felt safe, if you will.

**Scott**

I find that curious because Columbine was in Colorado. Was that far enough away that you didn't really have that connection and you felt safe?

**Hali**

Well, it wasn't on my radar like that because I didn't live in Colorado when that happened. I had heard of it just like probably most of us in the country had, but it wasn't real to me. I think I was also much younger when Columbine happened - nothing against age or younger people can't interpret things. You have a different attitude about life when you're younger. You just are a little bit more clueless about the frailty of things. And yeah, I knew about it, heard about it, probably didn't know many details, didn't know much about it, and it wasn't connected to me as a Coloradoan. But when this happened to a lot of other Colorado people who were here for Columbine, it was a hard, hard hit to the community.

**Scott**

How long after this was the trial? I mean, they caught the guy right away.

**Hali**

Yeah. Let's talk about that because that's an interesting side bit. Little did we know, when we were sitting in the theater waiting for the movie to start and picking our seats and yadda yadda, he was sitting in there too. He had bought his ticket. He was sitting in the theater. He was planning and plotting and he had gone over to the exit door and propped it open. He made it so he could come back that way later. That's how that happened. He did it himself. At some point, we're all settling in. I don't know if the movie started or whatever. I don't know when he left, but he was there and then he left after the door's propped open.

So he got in his car, drove his car around to the back of the theater, and prepped whatever. This was the SWAT outfit that I was previously describing. This was the stuff he was putting on. It was all things he had bought off the internet, we find out later. He had bought his weapons. He had bought something like 4,000 rounds of ammunition - some God-awful amount of ammunition. He had souped up the gun. He had a shotgun, but he also had an AR 15 - I believe that's the right type of weapon - and he had bought one of those things that you attach to it that allows it to shoot more rounds at a time. Like, maybe, I think AR15 comes with 15 rounds, and then there's that round thing or whatever, something you attach, and then you just have this chain of bullets coming out. That's what he had on it. They were attached to him or I don't know, but he had modified the weapon and had all his gear on. Obviously, he was getting what I later came to find out was tear gas, not poisonous gas. Thank God that I was breathing. He got all that together, and then that's essentially when he came in the door.

From John's perspective, John is paying attention. John is watching the shooter. John is looking at what he's doing and where he's going. He's formulating a plan while all the shooting is going down, while I'm a lump on the floor. John's watching and he said in his mind, "Okay, at some point, these bullets are going to run out. He cannot shoot forever. He has to run out of ammunition. He will have to reload. When that happens, I'm grabbing Hali and we're going out this particular exit," like I had said before, that he figured out was up the stairs. This was our escape route. He had it planned.

Well, what happened was that part of the gun that he added for the extra bullets got jammed, and John was watching, so he knew he was struggling with his weapon. Something's going wrong. When this was happening, the shooter dipped behind the wall on the other side of the theater. So, he's on the right side of the theater, we're on the left. He went behind that corridor where you came into the theater, so he's kind of hidden from John for a few minutes. That's when John grabbed me and we ran out. Unfortunately, after we left the theater, there was more shooting. There was more killing. There were hundreds of people trapped inside there.

To go back to your "middle seat" question, if I had been where I normally sat, we could have been trapped. There were people that were alive that were trapped under bodies that were injured. There were people who were trying to get out but couldn't because there were too many people in a row. If there were people in front of them that were like me - that were lumps on a log - they might not have been able to move. So there were a lot of people still in there. And when first responders and all those cops came into the theater after John and I left, they came into carnage still unfolding.

A lot of people there had a very different experience because, let's say, somebody else had their purse on the floor and didn't grab it. Well, now they're stuck out in the parking lot. Their purse, their phone, their keys, and everything are inside the theater, and it's now part of the investigation or whatever. Either way, it's not accessible that night, so they can't leave. But the parking lot is also blocked off because the cops don't want people leaving at that point. So John and I literally— I mean, I always say, John got me out of there as fast as he possibly could.

#### **Scott**

He saved your life.

#### **Hali**

Absolutely. He doesn't see it that way and wouldn't term it that way, but he absolutely did. I later found out John has military experience and used to be in the Navy and knew what tear gas was. While it was affecting him and a problem, he certainly didn't think it was poisonous gas like I did. Very different interpretation of. He knew the exposure, knew what it felt like, and knew that it wasn't going to hurt him in that regard. After the gun was unjammed, like I said, more shooting. There were shotgun shots. There were 58 people injured and 12 people killed that night.

You were asking about when the trial was. Within about a year, I think, is when the first thought of the trial started coming through, but it ended up being, I believe, 2-3 years before full sentencing actually happened. These things took a lot of time trying to get us all together and figure out how we all were, and then figuring out that somebody like me is not a very good witness. My eyes left the shooter, followed the tear gas, and never saw anything else after that because I was face-planted. John, on the other hand, was a very good witness, but John didn't want to be involved in the trial, and I inevitably decided that I didn't either because, A) I did not believe I would benefit the case in any way. If I did, I might have felt obligated. B) I decided, ultimately, it just was not good for me. It was not going to be good to be caught up in that. I was dealing with enough - so much guilt surrounding all of these things. I felt like I should do something and I had to come to terms with the fact that, yeah, it was okay for me to not be involved. So that was what I chose to do.

#### **Scott**

One thing I found really interesting is that you went on a retreat after this. Prior to going on that, you were pro-death penalty. After that, you were against the death penalty. Can you talk about what this retreat was and how it changed your mind?

**Hali**

The shooting happened on July 20th, 2012. I went on the retreat in February, March of 2013. At this point, I had done a little bit of therapy, but I still was in a very rough state of trying to process, and I kind of felt like this was do or die. If I don't chase something to heal myself and to just get a deeper understanding of what I'm feeling, I am not going to be okay from this because the traditional therapy, group therapy, and even going back to the movies, which all of which I had done at this point were just not— it's like I needed a ton of answers, but I had no idea what my questions were. That's how I felt every day. I had researched this 10-day silent meditation retreat. Somebody had told me about it about a year or two before, so it was on my radar already. I remember going to the website, reading everything, and thinking, "Oh my God, this way too extreme, no fricking way am I doing that." Well, fast forward to this, now I'm looking at it like, "This is my answer. This is what I need. I would love to." Can I give the website for this organization?

**Scott**

Sure. And we'll have it in the show notes too.

**Hali**

Okay. [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org). It's called Vipassana Meditation. It's very old and comes out of Burma and India. It's usually done for extreme extended periods of time where you are silent. They whittled it down to being 10 days in America because that's a more practical timeframe. But if you do less than 10 days, you can't submerge. You do not read, you do not write, you do not listen to music, you have no technology, you do not speak for 10 full days. Vipassana comes not only with meditative techniques and a particular path that you follow instead of saying a mantra. For example, you focus your brain on your body and it's just a very specific technique. You don't hurt other beings. There's a lot of philosophy behind it. You don't eat meat. It's a vegan diet while you're there.

You really just meditate 12-14 hours a day. It's a very physically painful and very uncomfortable inward journey. I'm not kidding you when I say 5 hours into the first day - 9 AM on the first day. I had a massive panic of "What have I done? This is the longest day of my life. It's only been five hours. How am I going to go 10 days?" But you fast forward into this technique and you start to submerge yourself and it becomes your life. You're only inside your own head and your own thoughts. You can't comfort someone else. You can't receive validation from someone else. You can't run something by anybody else. It's an inward journey like I've never experienced anywhere in my past, and it was very powerful and very beneficial.

So fast forward, I come out of my retreat. I got a call from the lawyers and the lawyers— if you were on their list of hundreds of people from that theater, I got asked many questions by the lawyers, "What was my opinion? Did we want to chase the death penalty? Did we want to go for life imprisonment? I went into that retreat thinking death penalty all the way. You take lives. You sort of deserve for your life to be taken." And I was 100 percent fine with that. I came out of this retreat and that question was posed to me and, all of a sudden, I feel completely different because it's one thing to say, "I don't care if this person lives or dies" because, I'm going to be honest, I don't have any feelings towards this person. I don't give him my hate. I don't give him my love. I just kind of think about him as if he doesn't exist. I don't give him any more power

than he already has had over my life is how I see it. But if you ask my vote, if you ask my opinion, I came out of this whole situation and that retreat feeling like, "No. Now, that's on my conscience. That's on my heart. I want nothing to do with being responsible for someone else's death, even if they do deserve it. That's not something I want to inflict or have a vote." So I did end up voting for life imprisonment. He did end up getting life imprisonment.

I believe that the majority of the victims actually did want the death penalty but, after the case and the trial all unfolded, he ended up getting 12 consecutive life imprisonment sentences. He will never get out. About a year after the trial was complete and he was sentenced, I got one final email from the lawyers that said, basically, his life was a living hell in prison, that he was in solitary confinement all the time because people in prison wanted to kill him. Nobody respected what he did. I don't know why but, even among criminals, what he did was apparently pretty messed up.

### **Scott**

Well, it's pretty cowardly.

### **Hali**

Yeah. People you don't even know— there's no personal connection. Not saying that it's okay if you kill someone but, at least, you have a reason to think that particular person slighted you or did you wrong. Right or wrong, you can kind of wrap your head around that. But yeah, walking somewhere and affecting 400-500 strangers in that way is hard to understand. There's this whole other side of his plan that night that furthers his sort of evil nature or disturbed nature or sick nature, whatever. I guess it's not my job to figure out what was wrong with him. Clearly, something was wrong though - I don't think he would have done this if not.

He had his apartment completely rigged up as a massive bomb. So while he was driving around to the back, he made a call. He made it so that cops would go to his apartment building. In his apartment building, he has it rigged up. It's wired with I don't know what kind of chemicals and things - perhaps you'll find that information somewhere in the ether that - but he had it set up where if you open the front door of his apartment, it would have blown up. It would have blown up his apartment and all the people in it.

Somehow, one of his neighbors - I actually met this person later and I had the chance to hear their side of the story - when their hand was on that doorknob and they were about to open it, their gut was telling them "Don't do this" because he was playing— again, it's midnight, one o'clock. The music was playing crazy loud and it had been playing crazy loud for a while. So the neighbors were getting more and more agitated, more and more aggravated. His idea was to bait them into his apartment to open the door. So the neighbor came over and the doors opened enough that they're like, "I could just push this door open. It's not latched," but their gut said, "Don't do that. This is weird. Something's going on." Whatever.

They called the cops and, thank God, none of that blew up. That whole part of his plan did not go the way he wanted. What we found out later is he wanted cops and first responders to be distracted so that they could not come and help at the theater. That was the two-part plan, so the real carnage could happen at the theater and, thank God, by the grace of God, that it didn't work out that way.

### **Scott**

Twelve people died. That's why he got 12 consecutive life sentences?

**Hali**

Exactly.

**Scott**

How have you dealt with survivor's guilt? Have you processed that completely now?

**Hali**

I have processed it completely at this point. I think, first and foremost, I came out with a lot of fear of going back to the movies, fear of how am I ever going to enjoy my birthday again, fear of, "Am I going to find joy in something I've loved my whole life?" Just fear all the way around. Because of that fear, the first thing I did was decide to go back to the movies. I was like, "F this guy. He took enough. He's not taking my love of the movies. I'm going to face this." And 3 months after the shooting, I went back to my first movie. I went in the middle of the day. I went to a comedy. It was all very well planned. I went with two of my best friends. I picked the theater that was way across town because I was like, "No, the layout of this— and nobody can get in here. It's a double-decker and the exits—" I mean, I was so anal about it, but that's what I needed to do to get comfortable.

The fifth movie that I went back to see was *The Dark Knight* itself because I was excited about that movie. I wanted to see it and, you better believe, I hyperventilated halfway through that movie. I went with my roommate and she'd have to put her hand on me. She'd say, "Are you okay?" And I was just roughing through it. Then I said, "Okay, now I'm finally ready for therapy." I always knew I would go to therapy, but there was also a part of me that didn't even know how to talk about this. So God bless the city of Aurora. They provided counseling services for any victims who wanted it. There were funds that came from I don't know where, but they were there for us.

I took advantage of 10 sessions with a therapist who helped me so much. I will never, ever forget what he said at the turning point of me finally starting to process my survivor's guilt. He said, "I would be more worried about you if you didn't feel guilty. Think about this. There's a bubble of logic and there's a bubble of emotion. Logically, we have to know you couldn't have done anything. It was not your fault. You wanted to say something. You wanted to say 'Fuck your shoes' to the girl and you couldn't. Physically, these things happen to us when we're in shock, when we're experiencing things we've never— it's like you can't process— your autonomic nervous system goes in, your fight or flight kicks in, literally systems shut down. You literally just cannot do things." And I started to learn all this. But that's all in the logical realm.

As a human, I still feel bad that people died around me and I didn't do anything. There's nothing that will ever change that per se, and he pointed out to me, "That's a good thing. You have a big heart. You'd possibly be a psychopath if you could care less that this happened that way. So when you separate that logical bubble and that emotional bubble, you should, as a human, feel guilty. It's okay. You just don't want to be controlled and run and beat yourself up over that guilt because you also have to balance the two," but it just made me feel better. He normalized like, "Oh, you're right. If I didn't feel bad, what would that say about me?"

But survivor's guilt - 100 percent was by far - I dealt with the fear very quickly. In fact, I'm not fearless now, but I am living a life that has— I travel the world alone. I do things alone all the time. I go camping alone now. Like, I embrace things that I don't think I ever would have done without this bad thing happening. But yeah, getting over that survivor's guilt and settling in what

I didn't do, and some of that was guilt towards myself. I don't know if guilt is the right word but, to go back to that vulnerability when I said John's name, I just never saw myself being a puddle of a person on the floor.

I was at lunch one day, I was at Chick fil A ordering my food and the lady behind the register said, "Weren't you in theater 9?" I was shocked. This is 10 months later. Nobody ever said this to me. Nobody ever recognized me outside of group therapy with other victims and things like that. I had met this girl previously at a group therapy session, didn't recognize her, but she recognized me. After we were blown away by that initial meeting, she took a break. We went over and sat in a booth right there in Chick fil A, and we talked, and we cried, and she altered the course of my thinking because she and her boyfriend were in the theater that night with a couple of other friends. All of them were injured, but her boyfriend had it worst of all.

Hearing her story - it's not about comparing - in some ways, I do feel like what she had to go through was worse than what I experienced because he was bleeding, he was very injured, she knew it, and then they got separated and she couldn't find him. So she's now calling hospitals, driving to different hospitals, trying to even find where he's located, and here I am safe with John sleeping in my bed, cuddling. You see what I'm saying? So I immediately am sort of thinking, "God, what do you have to feel bad about Hali? Listen to this poor lady's story."

She went on to tell me that they've now decided to get married. They're engaged and they've decided to get married on the anniversary of the shooting. She said that their faith in God and their belief that positivity can come from negative things, that you can recover and you can move on, and you can be a whole person after a tragedy. They wanted to rewrite the story of that day. I mean, I was crying in the booth. They invited me to the wedding. I went to the wedding and cried the whole time. The other two people who were in the shooting with them were in their wedding, and here I am thinking I'm dreading my birthday coming up. I'm dreading that day I'm questioning if I can ever enjoy it, and here they are choosing that date to get married and rewrite their own story. It was just the most beautiful thing ever. So shout out to Eugene and Casey for that beautiful inspiration. They are still married. They have three kids. I still see them on social media. We talk every now and again and reach out around the shooting anniversary and things like that. But yeah, that's what really started to help me with the survivor's guilt.

### **Scott**

As we wrap up, can you just talk about the movie theater. They had a grand reopening. I know, obviously, they were closed for an extended period of time, but you were allowed to go into the remodeled theater even before the public.

### **Hali**

Yes. It was so beautiful - what they did. They were going to be having a grand reopening. Like you said, they remodeled everything. They changed theaters. 1 through 15 is now Theater A through J or whatever. They remodeled the entrance so it didn't look the same. Anyway, they invited us to go. They said, "Before the grand opening, we'd like to have you here, just you and John." We drove up. There were police outside. It's blocked off, very safe. We got a police escort inside.

Once we got into the lobby, there was one representative from the movie theater who escorted us into the new theater. This is when I saw the whole remodel and how beautifully they did it. The bathroom entrance is now the entrance to the theater. So, when I walk in there, it doesn't

even look the same, which is great because, honestly, that would have been so triggering. They really thought that through. They changed colors. They changed the seats. They changed everything. It was really well done. John and I just got to walk in there and just have our time and space with no one else - just that one representative and that one police officer inside the whole theater. So they set that 10 or 20 minutes aside for just me and John. They did that for anybody that wanted it.

About 6-7 months after the shooting, they opened back up and we watched the first Hobbit movie. The mayor spoke. That's when I had an opportunity to meet people and hear stories that I had still never heard and piece together even more information. A year later, six months later, I was still meeting people and getting parts of the story that I had never heard before. I have a feeling that, when I listen to this podcast, because of your research, I'm going to hear pieces of this story I've never heard before.

### **Scott**

You're a good example of how we can go through trauma, but we can still recover and come out the other side. This hasn't defined your life.

### **Hali**

No, I mean, in some ways it's almost defined by being so hard and recovering from it. It doesn't define me as a person, for sure, but the things that I had to do and go through to recover have absolutely defined who I am as a person at this point, and I lovingly say now the worst thing that ever happened to me is the best thing that ever happened to me because it brought so much growth, change, and perspective that I would have never had compassion, understanding of the other side of things that, like I said before, you think you know what you'll think and feel and do, and you don't until you get there.

### **Scott**

James Holmes is currently incarcerated at the US Penitentiary Allenwood, in Pennsylvania.

And the 911 call you heard during the story? That was Zack Golditch, a 17 year old high school student at the time. He survived being shot in the neck, and today works as a first responder.

If you'd like to see pictures of Hali, or get a full transcript of this episode, you can do that at [WhatWasThatLike.com/165](http://WhatWasThatLike.com/165).

### **Voice mail**

Hey there, Scott. My name is Chris Jones and just want to say I've really been enjoying your podcasts since discovering it about a month ago. I'm currently a full-time rideshare driver with over 11 years and 11,000 rides under my belt, and got to say that podcasts like What Was That Like really help pass the time between pickups and while enroute.

I just listened to episode 73 about that pilot whose small airplane crashed into the forest. In your intro commentary at the beginning of the episode, you played actual audio from a commercial airline flight as it made an emergency landing, but you gave credit to the flight's pilot for making the announcement over the cabin loudspeakers, instructing the passengers how to prepare for a possible crash landing. Now, prior to becoming a rideshare driver, I was a flight attendant and I worked for a large regional airline for eight years, probably close to 4,000 flights.

Upon hearing the bracing instructions in that clip, I knew immediately that it was not the flight's captain giving those instructions but was, in all likelihood, the lead flight attendant or a flight attendant in that crew delivering part of what's known in some airlines as a planned emergency briefing. This is where a more thorough and detailed set of instructions is given to the passengers.

When there's not enough time or, rather, there is enough time to do so before the emergency actually takes place. Pilots wouldn't provide these instructions from the flight deck because it's the flight attendants who are trained to handle the aspects of all passenger safety issues and any emergencies that occur. The pilot's sole job is just to keep flying the airplane and managing whatever crisis is threatening the flight.

Being a former stew, as we used to call it, it's a real peeve of mine whenever I hear the mainstream media report that "The pilots have their hands full getting the stricken airplane on the ground and also getting the passengers out of the cabin afterward". I once actually heard CNN commentator Wolf Blitzer say nearly these very words in his reporting of the emergency landing made by an express jet aircraft a number of years ago. In that instance, it was a small regional jet operating the service and was only required by regs to have a single flight attendant working in the aircraft cabin. So she or he would have had their hands pretty full, single-handedly ensuring the successful evacuation of 40 to 50 passengers following that landing mishap, and we're trained for that. So it's not unusual to only have a single flight attendant. I believe the regs say that, for below 60 passengers only, one flight attendant on US aircraft is required. So it's quite a demanding job in that respect, and there's a reason that flight attendants undergo six to eight weeks of intense training to earn their wings.

I got to say that serving up soft drinks and pretzels from a cart is about 1% of what all that training entails. While the job of being a flight attendant can be and is a fun and rewarding one, it's also a demanding and often thankless occupation. So when I get a chance to correct errant reporting and give the credit where it's due, I take it. Thanks for allowing me the opportunity to set this record straight and please know that my intent here was only to offer constructive correction to your episode. Keep up the great work. And if you ever need a flight attendant on the show to illuminate what a fun, crazy, hair-pulling, smile-through-the-tears job it is, I'd be happy to take my turn at the mic.

Thanks again, Scott, and have a great one.

#### **Scott**

Big thanks to Chris for providing that information! I always appreciate it when someone takes the time to point out something I've said that was incorrect. And if you'd like to hear the episode he was referring to, it's episode #73, titled "Matt crashed his plane in the wilderness".

And Raw Audio 38 is now live! The Raw Audio episodes are extra, exclusive episodes with actual 911 calls and the stories that go with those calls. In this episode, you'll hear about an off-duty police officer who answers the door, prompting his wife to call 911 –

#### **Female caller 1**

Oh my gosh, they're in an altercation. You have to get to our house.

#### **911 Operator**

Yeah, they're coming as fast as they can, okay? Keep that door closed, okay?



**Scott**

A grandmother calls when she realizes her house is on fire –

**Female caller 2**

I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

**911 Operator**

Okay, ma'am. Listen. They're coming. They're coming. Are you inside of a room? Where are you?

**Scott**

And a not-so-smart thief accidentally dials 911 while committing a felony.

**Male caller 1**

Okay, we got it. Make sure you get that number locked in, okay?

**911 Operator**

Okay. We've got the whole recording.

**Scott**

All 38 episodes of Raw Audio are available to binge, and you can try it for free. If you use an Android phone, just go to [WhatWasThatLike.com/PLUS](http://WhatWasThatLike.com/PLUS). On an iPhone, just go to the What Was That Like podcast feed and click on "Try Free". When you sign up, you're not just supporting the show – you also get all of the regular What Was That Like episodes without any ads! It's a no-brainer!

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now we have – the Listener Story. I have to admit, I love this segment of the show. People send in their personal story of something that happened, usually about 5-10 minutes long, and that's how we end every episode. And you can send in YOUR story – just record it on your phone and email to [Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com](mailto:Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com).

This week's story is from a listener who had a bad interaction with someone you'd normally expect to trust.

Stay safe, and I'll see you back here in 2 weeks, with the next brand-new episode.

---

(Listener Story)

I just woke up from a pretty crazy nightmare, but that's not why I'm calling. I'm calling because of the source of that nightmare. Just last weekend, I was assaulted just outside of my own house. It was at 11.30 PM and I was having a small open fire in my small fire pit - it's portable - just outside of my home in Columbus, Ohio. I live in a bad neighborhood and a lot of people feel their need to protect themselves. So you'll see people waiting around for their DoorDash to

arrive with a banana clip hanging out of their pocket - some big extended clip for a pistol, very obvious kind of stuff.

I was approached by a would-be security guard, and he seemed polite enough. He was asking me what I was doing, and I said, "I'm just having a little fire." He said, "So you're going to clean it up when you're done?" I said, "Yeah, I'm not going to walk away from an open flame. I know better." He said, "Yeah, a lot of people aren't smart enough to do that." And I said, "Yeah, I agree." He started asking me where I live and if I belong there. I said, "Look, man, I'm not going to give you any of my personal information, but I do belong here and I do live here." He said, "Well, I'm going to need to identify you and confirm that you live here." I said, "Well, I'm not going to give you any of my personal information, so what happens next?" He said, "Well, I can physically remove you." I said, "No, you're not. You should probably call the police or a supervisor." He quickly cut me off and said, "I am a supervisor." And I said, "Well, let's call the police." I pulled out my phone and I went to look up the non-emergency number, and I told that to him verbally. I said, "Look, I'm going to call the non-emergency number because I have time."

Long story short, my phone died right in my hands, and this guy started asking me if I have any weapons, and I said, "I'm polite enough to tell you I don't have any weapons on me. I'm not going to make any moves against you, but I belong here. You should probably get the police here because I'm not going to give you any of my information." And I asked what happens next. He said, "Well, I can physically remove you." I said, "No you can't." So the guy got behind me and he started yelling, "Pull your hands out of your pockets!" I've got my little 75-pound pit bull with me and she's just all love and all kisses. She saw him grab ahold of me, pulled out a taser, and tased me in my chest. Well, this guy flipped me and he threw me on my back and I landed on my back on a pile of rocks and dirt. I tried to stabilize myself on his leg and he grabbed my jacket and wrapped it around my throat and he was choking me.

This time, my dog slipped out of her harness when he flipped me the first time. He pulled back and the harness came slipping right off of her. Anyways, this guy was holding me down by my throat and by my neck, and he's got his knee on my chest, and he's telling me, "Tell me where you live!" At the threat of coercion, I saw my little dog running around without her harness, freaking out.

I told him that my apartment number is 2125. There was this lady that was with him, and I thought she was, like, a passerby. So, as this all began, I said, "Ma'am, can you please call the police? This man's going to assault me." This lady got behind him and she went, "Just tell us where you live." So she's with him. I thought it was his girlfriend. I later found out she was a security guard for a different security unit, but she was in plain clothes.

After he attacked me and I told him where I lived, I ran into my house and I called the police. By the time the police got there, this guy was long gone. They've since got his name, his company and we're filing charges, but I have not been right since. I can't sleep, I can't leave my house, and I just want to let everybody know that not everybody who's in security should be trusted. This guy attacked me for no reason when I had every right to be where I am.

So, Scott, I love your show. You're amazing. I doubt this is going to make it, but I just had to share this with somebody. This is tough stuff. I just woke up from the worst nightmare and I just had to get it off my chest. Have a good one, buddy. I love your show. You do amazing things. You are the most awesome interview I've ever heard. Have a good one, buddy.