

## **Episode 174 Daniel biked across the US**

I've always been fascinated with the idea of human endurance. What are we actually capable of doing? It's almost always a lot more than we think.

At some point, I want to do a long distance bike ride. So far, the longest I've biked in a day is about 50 or 60 miles. And that was right here in this area, so afterward I went home and slept in my own bed.

But I'd really like to bike from here in the Tampa Bay area, across to the other side of Florida, the east coast. It would probably take me like 3 days. I love the idea of that kind of adventure.

But my guest today, Daniel, had a much bigger idea. His plan was to ride his bike across the entire US - from San Francisco all the way to New York City.

And – he started this ride without carrying any money or any food. He was going to depend on the kindness of strangers all along the way.

And that's exactly what he did. But that's not all – he recorded video all along the way. And he turned that into a documentary that's won a ton of awards. So we get to see him struggling to bike up mountains, and across long stretches where he saw no one, and through some scary neighborhoods.

But my favorite part, and what made Daniel's journey so magical, are the people he encountered along the way.

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### **Scott**

Do you remember a specific moment when you came up with this idea? How did it come about?

### **Daniel**

I honestly think that it kind of started from my childhood. Growing up, my mother really struggled with alcohol abuse and drug addiction. I didn't have much of a connection with her. She ended up dying at a young age and it never really gave me the opportunity to get to know who she was as a person. I felt that lack of connection with her. That was kind of instilled in me at a young age. Then, my father ended up passing away at a young age as well. After those two things happened to me, I really started to question life and what I wanted to do with my own life with just that lack of human connection that I felt with my parents being gone.

Around the time that my father passed away, somebody gave me a book called "The Kindness of Strangers." It was about a guy who hitchhiked across America with no food. He wrote a book about all the people that he met along the way. After reading that book, I felt so inspired and I thought, "Man, I would love to kind of recreate something like that." After my father passed, I just felt this sense of recklessness in me. I really wanted to do something because I thought he was going to live a lot longer - same with my mom - and I realized who knows how long I'll be around for. So yeah, that book inspired me.

I thought instead of hitchhiking across America, what if I were to try to ride my bike across it? Cause I think that when you ride your bike, you really connect with the communities that you're riding through. You get to know the land very well. Like, when you're climbing over the Rocky Mountains on a bicycle, you really feel the Rocky Mountains and you smell the areas that you're going through. And being on a bicycle attracts curiosity from people. They see that you have your bags and they think, "Where is this guy coming from? What's his story?" I thought that would give me an advantage if I was making a documentary because I figured I would have this unique opportunity to connect with the people that I met because of the curiosity that they have.

So I kind of combined that recklessness that I was feeling and also that sense— I wanted to really push it because who knows how long I'll be around for, and that's pretty much what inspired the journey

### **Scott**

You mentioned your documentary and I watched it. Actually, I've watched it twice and it's amazing. We're going to have a link to that so people can watch it. But some of the questions that I have are— it's kind of divided into two groups.

One is the social aspect of it. Who did you meet, who did you encounter and how did that all work? But also, I'm really interested in the logistics of how you do this long cross-country trip and make a documentary at the same time. I guess I have all kinds of questions, but let's talk about what was the original plan. You're in San Francisco and you were planning to go from there to New York City. Was the round trip part of the plan or how did that come into formation?

### **Daniel**

The original plan was to try to get to New York City with no food or money. I had a sign that said, "Biking across the country, ran out of food, anything helps." And then I was panhandling. I decided to use hidden camera glasses because I didn't want the people to know that I was making a documentary at the moment because I was trying to capture the real genuine interactions that I had with people. If I was fortunate to receive help from somebody, I'd say, "Hey, do you have a story about when somebody helped you when you really needed it?" I started collecting stories about people's hardships and compassion that they'd experienced in their own lives, and I was trying to figure out why were these people helping. What makes them want to help?

My goal was to get all the way to New York City from San Francisco. I remember standing at the Golden Gate Bridge when I left San Francisco and I was staring at it and thinking, "Oh my God, I have so far to go." And I felt this sense of, like, panic for a second because I thought how far the Brooklyn bridge is - like, 3,600 miles away from here - and it was really intimidating. But what I found was, as soon as I started pedaling, I immediately felt better because I realized, "Just take it one day at a time. The goal was just to get to New York City." I got there and I felt, "Well, I think I want to keep going."

### **Scott**

How far in advance did you plan this? How long did it take you to put it all together?

### **Daniel**

I'd say about a year in advance. I really started looking at different routes, etc. Again, going back to the recklessness in me, I wanted to choose the most challenging route that I could find because I really wanted to push myself. It was kind of like a moment of just I didn't care what

happened really because I was feeling so reckless, but I feel like I channeled that in a way that was positive because I wanted to make something about compassion and adventure, etc. So that's why I chose a route over the mountains and through the deserts.

**Scott**

How long did you think it would take?

**Daniel**

I thought that I would get to New York in about two and a half months, but I quickly realized that— I mean, from just the time that I would spend panhandling every couple of days, I would spend eight hours out there. Also, I realized that, sometimes, I would have a connection with somebody in a town and I would sit there for three hours and just hang out. So that kind of changed my schedule as well. Sometimes, I'd meet somebody and they'd say, "Hey, do you need a place to stay for the night?" And then I'd end up in a stranger's home having dinner with them, which is really beautiful.

**Scott**

Yeah. I love that part of it. You just said, "Okay, I'm going to meet somebody. I'm going to hang out with them for a while." And you met some really interesting people. Can you summarize your inventory of stuff that you brought with you when you started? What did you have?

**Daniel**

I had my surly long haul trucker bicycle, which is a touring bike. It's able to hold a lot of weight and gear. I had about 60 pounds of gear. I had my hidden camera glasses. I brought a drone with me to capture the landscape shots. To program the drone, I would use my phone and use the GPS on it to program it to where it would follow me. So it gave you some really cool landscape shots and it seemed like I had a film crew with me. Then, I brought a GoPro camera that I strapped to my chest when I was riding to give that first-person view to make the viewer feel like they were there on the bike with me. And then I brought a tent and a sleeping bag. I brought some cooking gear, a water purifier, and a lot of— or not a lot, but I had some change of clothes. That's pretty much it. The camera gear is what weighed the most out of anything.

**Scott**

Did you forget anything?

**Daniel**

You're going to think this is absolutely ridiculous, but I left and I forgot my jacket. So I had my brother meet me in Santa Cruz and he brought the jacket for me on the date I left.

**Scott**

Yeah. Cause you did run into some cold weather for parts of this trip. You definitely wanted a jacket, I'm sure.

**Daniel**

Yeah, definitely. The one thing with my gear is, because I wasn't planning on being on the road for too long, I only brought summer gear with me. But because I ended up spending seven months on the road, I definitely wasn't prepared for winter. When winter came and I was in Montana, I mean, I was trying to use my summer gear to stay warm and that really wasn't helping too well.

**Scott**

Okay, but when you started out, you left San Francisco, you literally had no food with you and you had no money in your pocket.

**Daniel**

Yeah, there was no food or money and I just had my sign that said, "Biking across country. Ran out of food. Anything helps." But one thing, Scott, I will mention is, I read a book by an environmental activist named Rob Greenfield. He rode his bike across America and he was dumpster diving a lot of the way. So I knew he was going behind grocery stores to find food that was being thrown away. So I knew that was an option that was always going to be, like, a backup option if I needed it, which gave me more confidence.

**Scott**

In watching the documentary, it seems like, in a lot of cases, that was plan A, right? Cause you, you hit a lot of dumpsters.

**Daniel**

Yeah. Scott, it was really interesting. I had no idea that there was that much food being thrown away. I mean, it was insane. There were actually times where I would prefer, especially as time went on— sometimes, the panhandling could just be so mentally exhausting and I didn't want to stand out in public for eight hours, so I would just— it was a lot easier to go behind a grocery store and just grab some food that was in the dumpster and that, and then I just keep going on my bike.

**Scott**

Yeah. You're still self-sustaining, so to speak. But eight hours is a long time. When you started this, did you plan on spending that much time at each place just to get food or money?

**Daniel**

No. I thought it was going to be a lot less, honestly. But I would stop every three days, though, as well. Like, I wouldn't stop for eight hours. The eight hours would give me the opportunity to have enough food or money for about three days or so. Obviously, it depended but, usually, I felt like, "Okay, I have enough to where I can keep going." It also gave me a chance to rest my legs in some ways. So it was, like, a day off from riding the bike.

**Scott**

So you started on the California coast. Is that where you live?

**Daniel**

Yeah. I live in Monterey, California.

**Scott**

Was there any publicity? How many people knew you were doing this?

**Daniel**

What's really funny is I hardly told anybody I was doing it besides my close friends and family because there was this level that I wanted to be, like, anonymous on the road and I didn't want people to know what I was doing. For example, there'd be times I would meet other people on bike tours who were going across the country and they would say, "Hey, do you want to ride with us for the day?" But I'd actually declined because I felt like it was going to kind of get in the

way of my documentary and my story, etc. So there was this level of anonymity that I tried to maintain the whole time.

**Scott**

From the time you started, how long before you stopped to ask for donations?

**Daniel**

The first time I stopped was about 45 miles. Yeah. I rode 45 miles on the first day. Then, I met a man in Santa Cruz. It was really interesting. He kind of foreshadowed. It was amazing. I asked him, "What made you want to help me, man?" He said, "There's this quote that I learned at a young age cause I went through some struggles myself. I don't give because I have a lot. I give because I know what it's like to have absolutely nothing." It was really fascinating because he was the first person that I met and he pretty much foreshadowed the whole journey for me because that's what I started to witness as time went on.

**Scott**

I know you didn't put every person that you encountered in the documentary, but I remember seeing that guy. When you stopped that first time, how nervous were you to start standing there holding that sign?

**Daniel**

Oh man, it's hard to explain. I felt so self-conscious. I had no idea about just how much shame and guilt I would feel by holding a sign that was pretty much asking for help, and it hit me immediately. I mean, the funny thing with this journey is I really didn't have much of a plan at all. I just figured, "Okay, I'm going to go ride my bike and just really just see what happens." So when I finally received help from someone, the first thing that came to mind was like, "Hey man, do you have a story about when somebody helped you?" And that was, like, spur of the moment. I just thought about that and then I just ended up sticking with that question the whole time.

**Scott**

That is such an amazing question. I can't believe, right off the top of your head, you just decided to ask him. So you weren't planning to ask him anything?

**Daniel**

Not really, no, I didn't really know what to say. That's the funny thing about this. Again, in some ways, I think that I wanted to keep some serendipity with this whole experience and that's why there wasn't so much planning as far as the route goes. Even every night, I didn't know where I was going to sleep or what town I was going to stop in, and that kind of increased the adventure and it just felt more authentic. And I kind of felt like I was evolving with just the flow of the journey, if that makes sense.

**Scott**

Yeah. Where did you camp on the first night?

**Daniel**

Yeah, the very first night, I didn't know where I was going to sleep. I slept behind a baseball field. That's another thing that's just, again, kind of funny. I came across the baseball field. I thought, "Oh, this seems like kind of a safe place to sleep." And then as time went on, that was always kind of my go-to option. If I couldn't find a place off the side of the road or in the woods,

especially in these more, like, condensed cities, the baseball field— I would hide out in the dugout and it gave me some safety and kept me from the rain.

The other funny thing too, is— I mean, I was always trying to find a place to bathe. and sometimes I would jump in a river to bathe. Other times, at baseball fields, once it got dark, I would just strip butt naked and just use their hose and just be showering in the middle of the baseball field. Just a random bike rider who's naked showering in the—

**Scott**

I would be thinking, “Okay, I'm out miles from home. I'm naked in a baseball field. What am I doing with my life?”

**Daniel**

Yeah, that's so funny. And there was also, it's, kind of liberating in some ways because I just, like, really wanted to get into almost like the primal aspect of it. Like, I hardly wore a shirt the whole time when I was riding my bike because I felt like, when I grew a beard and it just— I really wanted to be in the lifestyle and it's kind of exciting where, while you're riding across different States and different areas, you're always kind of looking for resources. What can I use to kind of help guide me along this - whether it's using the dumpster, using the baseball field, jumping in a river, or sleeping in weird places?

**Scott**

Yeah. What were some of the more unusual places you slept? I know one of them was a graveyard, right?

**Daniel**

Yeah. That one was in Pennsylvania. I was riding near the Appalachian mountains and it was just, like, a rural area. It was getting dark and I came across— next to an abandoned house, there was this small graveyard of maybe 15 graves. I thought, “Well, this is the only place that's flat around here that has decent grass.” So I just set up my tent there and that was a pretty memorable night.

And it was kind of a funny one. When I was in Colorado, there were a lot of wildfires happening. For a couple of days, I was trying to outrun these wildfires because of all the smoke/ Eventually, the smoke caught up to me. For a couple of days, I was breathing in that smoke and it was really starting to hurt my lungs, especially after eight hours of sleeping in a tent. I came across this old football equipment shed behind this high school and I thought, “It's summertime, so it's totally fine if I just sleep in this football equipment shed.” And there were soft pads that I put on the ground and I really got a good night's sleep there and it kept me from the smoke.

Then, the next morning, I woke up at 8 AM and loaded my bike up with all my gear, and I walked out of the football shed and there's this football team of, like, 40 players that are practicing - I guess, summer practice. And everybody literally - it was like a movie - stopped the practice and just stared at me thinking, “What the hell is this guy doing coming out of the shed at eight in the morning? Was he sleeping in there?”

**Scott**

Yeah. Yeah. I bet they were talking about that for a while.

**Daniel**

Definitely. Definitely.

**Scott**

And did you sleep on a high school roof?

**Daniel**

Yeah, that was actually the third night. Basically, I was near Davis, California. I set up my tent in this baseball field at first but I woke up in the middle of the night and there were cockroaches everywhere in my tent. Also, they got in my tent. It was so disgusting and there was no way I could fall back asleep just knowing they were crawling all over. So I didn't know what to do. Again, I woke up at, like, maybe two in the morning, just grabbed my stuff, hopped on top of this fence, threw my gear on top of this roof at this high school, and I slept up there. It was a very strange place but also a memorable place. It was kind of cool to watch the sunrise being on top of the roof there.

**Scott**

And then there was another time you slept inside a tree.

**Daniel**

That was probably literally the best night's sleep I got in the whole seven-month journey. I was riding through Northern California through the Redwoods and it started to rain in the late afternoon, so I thought, "Okay, I got to find a place that will keep me dry." And I came across this redwood grove - I'm talking huge redwoods that are, like, 1,500 years old - and the bottom of one of them was hollowed out. So I set up my tent inside the tree. It was such a huge tree. I could stand up with no problem inside the tree. In some ways, I mean, it kept me dry from the rain and it also kept me warm. I know that kind of sounds a little hippie-ish but, in some ways, I felt like the 1,500-year-old tree was nurturing me in some ways and I slept so good that night.

**Scott**

You do have a little bit of a hippie streak in you, right? I mean, that's what it sounds like anyway.

**Daniel**

That's definitely in me for sure, yeah.

**Scott**

Okay. So you're going on and you were, like, three days in and you had your first bike repair issue. Something went wrong with the bike and you had to hitchhike. Have you ever done that before?

**Daniel**

No, that was my first time hitchhiking. Again, I didn't know what I was doing. I just didn't know how long it would take or whatever. The crazy thing about that is I set my stuff down because my seat broke and I can't ride a bike with a broken seat. I thought, "Let's see what happens." I walked to the side of the road. Two cars passed by, and the third car— so, literally, it was 15 seconds. The third car picked me up and it was unbelievable.

**Scott**

And that was the guy in the little van, right?

**Daniel**

Yeah. He was in a Westfalia van, and he said, "It'll break your heart if a Westfalia van passes you by and doesn't pick you up."

**Scott**

That guy was hilarious too. I mean, I guess you guys were going up a hill or something. He had it all the way to the floor and it just wasn't making any progress - hardly - and he's swearing at the people honking at him.

**Daniel**

Yeah. He was such a funny guy. He was in his mid-eighties and this Sicilian guy - that's how we bonded. I'm Sicilian. He's Sicilian. His old van was so old and broken, beaten up, and he was driving so slow to where there was this huge line of traffic going. He was talking to me, and then a bunch of people is honking and he stopped his conversation and he went, "Fuck you asshole." And then he just went right back into the conversation as if nothing happened.

**Scott**

He's used to it probably.

**Daniel**

It sounds like it.

**Scott**

Carson Pass in Eastern California was over 8,000 feet elevation and you were really struggling. Did you train for that kind of elevation?

**Daniel**

Yeah, that's one thing I did. I worked with a physical therapist for six months before I left, and she was really trying to get my body nice and strong for that mountain pass. And that was the big test for me. That was the first really big mountain pass that I faced and it was a struggle. I had to take a lot of breaks while I was riding up the pass but, eventually, I got up to the top of the pass and it was so beautiful. When I got up there, it was up into the snow, and then, as soon as you descended that pass, you crossed the border and then you're in Nevada and it was amazing because, 20 minutes earlier at the top of the pass, there was snow and pine trees. Then, after 20 minutes of riding, all of a sudden, I looked around and there were cactuses and you're in the desert.

**Scott**

As much as you struggled going up the mountains, you seem to really love just coasting down at high speed on the other side,

**Daniel**

there's nothing quite like the feeling that you get when you're been working five hours climbing up a mountain pass and you have all that gear and you're sweating, and you just want to get to the top and then you're rewarded with this wonderful feeling of just adrenaline rush as you're just bombing down the mountain, and that's when I feel the most alive when I'm riding. My bike is just going fast down a mountain pass. In some ways, you look at the mountains and there's this challenge or obstacle in front of you and you think, "Can I do this? Can I ride over this?" And I like to kind of make a game out of it in some ways and look at it as this obstacle that's in my way. "Can I, in some ways, conquer the mountain - if that makes sense? And when you get over

the top of it, it just feels like a moment of celebration to just feel the wind in your face and just give your legs a break. Also, usually, when you get to the top of the mountain, you have a wonderful view and it reveals “Where am I going next?”

After crossing Carson Pass and being in the pine trees, I realized, “Oh, I'm heading down into the desert now.” I crossed the Great Basin Desert in Nevada and they call it the loneliest road in America. This particular road is about a 400-mile stretch with only four towns. There were 18 mountain passes to climb and it was super intimidating going through there. Before I rode the desert, this man told me, “You better be aware of the scorpions. There's a lot of scorpions. If you're gonna be camping out there, watch out for the coyotes too.” And he warned me about running out of water. So I was feeling pretty intimidated before riding into the desert.

There was one particular day that really stood out to me. There was an 84-mile day with three mountain passes to climb with no services. I thought the most intense part was there was no shade. So I woke up with a certain kind of intensity that day and thought, “Okay, respect the desert. Cause this is no joke. You got a long way to go, especially carrying 60 pounds of gear.” After a couple of mountain passes, I had 35 miles left to go and I ran out of water because this hellish headwind hit me. It was really slowing my pace down. When I ran out of water, I got a little nervous because I still had 35 miles. I got so dehydrated that my nose started to bleed and that's when I got really concerned because I thought, “Okay, now I'm losing a lot of electrolytes and that's getting me super dehydrated.”

As I kept riding, I started to feel like I had the flu and felt super sick. What made it even worse was being out in the desert. Just along the side of the road, there were just tons of, like, carcasses from dead animals like dead cows and horses that wandered off and just died of thirst. So that definitely didn't increase my confidence as I'm out of water, seeing all these dead animals. Eventually, I was able to make it over the third mountain pass and get out of the desert, but that was a super intense part of the ride and one that I'll never forget.

### **Scott**

Talking about where you were planning to go, I assume you used your phone for GPS the whole time to track your route.

### **Daniel**

I purchased these maps by Adventure Cycling Association for about the first half of the trip for the western part of the country, and they were kind of more cycle-friendly roads, if that makes sense. It was a longer route, if that makes sense, but it would keep you away from traffic for the most part. So I used those maps up until I got to St. Louis. Then, when I got to St. Louis, I started using my phone for GPS. Again, I just knew, “Okay, I'm heading towards New York City.” It's just going in a general direction. But there were also a lot of times when I would ask people when I was panhandling, “Hey, are there any cool roads that you'd recommend just going east?” And the locals would fill you in on certain roads that the GPS wouldn't normally pick up on.

### **Scott**

How did you keep all this equipment charged? Did you use solar?

### **Daniel**

Yeah, great question. So I had a solar panel on the back of my sleeping bag. So, on the back of my rack, I would strap down my tent and my sleeping bag. Then, when it was sunny out, I would just strap the solar panel on there to charge some stuff. Then, also, every couple of days, I

would stop in the local library and I would charge my stuff that way. That was always cool because I just liked the vibe of different libraries and I got to know a lot of different libraries going across the country. There's just a really good feeling going into a local library, especially in these small towns of maybe a couple hundred people. You get this chance to connect with the people who work there, and it's just really special.

**Scott**

Yeah, libraries are amazing. They do so much. You met new people pretty much every day, but did you ever experience loneliness on this trip for yourself?

**Daniel**

Yeah, there was loneliness and I think that it was because I grew a beard on purpose because I wanted to see if that would change the way that people treated me and, without a doubt, it did. Yeah, very obvious and more effective than I thought it would. When I was more clean-cut, I felt like I was more approachable. But as my appearance was changing, I noticed that people wouldn't make eye contact with me as much. I was receiving much less help. Even when I would ask the question, "Hey, do you have a story about when somebody helped you?" In the beginning, people were open and receptive to that. But as I had a long beard, people were like, "Here's \$5 but don't talk to me. I want to do my good deed." And then that was it. So I definitely started to feel lonely. As I was standing out there with my sign, in some ways, I started to feel invisible in a way and it really made me think about how lonely that could be for people who live that lifestyle every day.

**Scott**

Did you see any other people holding signs like that? Like, actual people that are homeless and I'm wondering if they would say, "Hey, this is my territory."

**Daniel**

Yeah. Really interesting point that you bring up is, on the West coast, I definitely saw a lot more homeless people who were holding signs and I learned that there's some kind of territorial thing going on and you could feel it. Like, sometimes, I would be holding my sign, and then I'd see somebody else that was holding a sign who was actually homeless and I would get a look and I knew I needed to leave here for numerous reasons. First of all, I want to be respectful. That's their real life and I'm just choosing to do this. Then, also, it did feel dangerous at times because it did feel like the guy was saying in some ways, "This is my territory. You're taking away from me eating or me getting some money." So, it felt threatening at times. I definitely felt that tension.

**Scott**

What kind of food did you find in dumpsters?

**Daniel**

Man, I couldn't believe the amount of fresh strawberries and bananas and apples. I mean, that was just a staple for me, especially in the summertime, and I'm talking fresh. There's nothing wrong with these and they weren't even in the compost bin. They were in the dumpster. A huge staple for me was bagels. There were always bagels being thrown out and you get a lot of carbohydrates from the bread there. I ate a ton of peanut butter and jelly and the bagels were always a good option. I came across steaks. I came across tons of yogurt.

**Scott**

Did you have a way of cooking the steaks?

**Daniel**

I did. Yeah. On the top of my cooking pot, you could flip it over and you could use it as a little frying pan, so it was pretty, pretty sweet. That was amazing. And the eggs stay good for so long. So I would just hard boil. I came across the carton and, cool, I got a dozen eggs here. I'll just hard boil these and I can just be snacking on these for the next couple of days.

**Scott**

I would think you must have been conflicted at some point because when you look in a dumpster and you see a dozen bunches of bananas, I mean, you can only eat so many at one time but yet you don't want to bring all of them with you for tomorrow and the next day because it's more weight and, plus, they're gonna go bad.

**Daniel**

Yeah, it's so funny that you mentioned that because I definitely felt those moments. The first time I started dumpster diving, I just loaded as much as I could. But then, I realized the two things you mentioned, first of all, my bike felt super heavy after that. Then, I realized I just couldn't carry this much food. There's not enough room and it felt like it was too much - and I'm talking literally. I can't stress enough - I'm talking about dumpsters that were full of food. It was unbelievable and shocking.

**Scott**

The first time when you pointed the camera in there at all those bins of strawberries and they're all just fine- it's amazing what we threw away.

**Daniel**

Yeah. I think the grocery stores are afraid of getting sued, so they don't want to take any chances at all, so they just throw away the food.

**Scott**

I want to talk about one of the people that you met. I think one of the earliest- well, maybe not one of the earliest ones but the one that really struck me- this woman named Fabiola. Where was she? Where did she live?

**Daniel**

That was in Kansas City, Missouri.

**Scott**

Okay. All right. She actually invited you into her home. I mean, my listeners know that one of the things that I really love is talking to people and having a really heartfelt or deep conversation. You had that with her that night. That must've been amazing.

**Daniel**

Yeah. Scott, there were certain moments along this journey that felt like it was fate to meet some of these people, if that makes sense. What happened with Fabiola was I was riding through Kansas City. I had my shoes on the front of my bike strapped down and I dropped a shoe, and I realized that after a couple of minutes, so I turned around and rode my bike back. It was at the stoplight. At the stoplight, this woman named Fabiola said, "Oh my gosh, are you on a bike tour? Where are you coming from? I'm so excited to see you." And just really quickly, I

said, "I'm Daniel. I came from San Francisco." Then the light turned green and then she sped off. Then, I went panhandling in a different part of Kansas City.

Five hours later - Kansas City is a big city and it was probably 10 miles away from where I met her - I ran into her again and I thought, "Oh my gosh." We had a chance to talk and Fabiola said, "Do you need a place to stay for the night?" And I thought, "Oh my gosh, absolutely." Like, it's incredible to be welcomed especially since I've been sleeping outside in a tent for the last couple of months. I had dinner with her and her family. She was from Nicaragua. So they cooked some nice Nicaraguan food. After dinner, I sat at the dinner table with her and I said, "Fabiola, what, made you want to stop and just start talking to me and invite me into your house?" She said, "I saw you on your bike tour and it made me think about my husband. My husband's dream was to ride across the country. He didn't get a chance to do that because he died of cancer when he was 40. I saw you and I wanted to celebrate my husband's spirit. So I felt like I wanted to do something kind for you in honor of my husband. That's why I welcomed you into my house." And it was really beautiful because when we first met, she was talking about growing up in Nicaragua and speaking Spanish, and growing up poor, and I didn't grow up with either of those things. I was fortunate. I wasn't poor throughout my life and I've been pretty privileged growing up in California.

It made me realize when she started talking about her husband who passed from cancer and she started telling stories about what it was like those couple of years that he was struggling—my father passed from cancer and I remember, as she's describing these stories, I started to think, "Oh my gosh, I have these same emotions. I went through these same human experiences that you did." And it made me realize that, yeah, we grew up differently in these different cultures, but we also shared this common human experience of grief over losing a loved one, and that was just so beautiful because I instantly felt way more connected to her that way.

**Scott**

The perfect ending to the story would be that you and Fabiola are now married.

**Daniel**

I know, right? I know.

**Scott**

But that didn't happen though. Have you had any contact with her since then?

**Daniel**

Yeah, absolutely. The really cool thing is throughout this whole process of putting out the documentary anytime it was in a film festival and you're showing for different places, I'd always reach out to the people that are in the film to help me because it wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for these super special people. They helped create this story. So anytime I have the chance to connect with them, I do. And the really cool thing is I've stayed in contact with almost every single person in the film, which is super special. There are a couple of homeless people who I wasn't able to keep in contact with just because they lived, kind of, that transient lifestyle, but I still talk to most of the people.

**Scott**

That is so cool. I really loved watching all the interactions between you and the people who wanted to help you, and so many people said, "Hey, I've been through tough times and people helped me." Was that kind of a common theme?

**Daniel**

Yeah, And that kind of goes back to where we were talking about the very first person I met who said, "I don't give because I have a lot. I give because I know what it's like to have absolutely nothing." I really started to see that going through impoverished neighborhoods. For example, I was riding through Dayton, Ohio and this guy came up to me. His name is Shorty. He said, "Hey, here's a couple of dollars for you." I said, "Thanks, man. Do you have a story when somebody helped you and you needed it?" And Shorty went, "Well shoot, man. Right now, I'm going through kind of a tough time. I don't have a job. I'm homeless. But God got me. It's not to our understanding but there's a bigger plan for your life. Sometimes you got to go with it. In ups and downs, you got to keep on smiling and you got to help another brother out." So inspiring because it made me look at my own life and made me realize how much I actually do have. Witnessing this homeless man who literally doesn't have a job and is sleeping on the streets but he's still willing to help somebody was really beautiful, and he wasn't the only homeless person that I met who ended up helping me. I mean, as you see in the film, there were numerous homeless people and it was really beautiful to be able to witness that.

**Scott**

How do you think this trip would have been different if you were not a white man?

**Daniel**

Yeah, I think it would have been tremendously different. The reason I say that is because, I mean, within the first week when I was riding through the Sierra Nevadas, this very nice man, as I was riding past his house, said, "Do you need a place to camp?" And I said, "Yeah, that sounds great." He said, "You can camp in my yard, man." "Thank you, man. That's super kind of you." So I stayed there for the night.

Then, the next day, he said, "You want to go on a hike?" And I thought, "Oh, for sure. This is great." I got to see the area a little bit. He showed up on this hike and I'm feeling very welcomed. Then, pretty much out of nowhere, he just started going on this rant about how he hates black people. That was just a very eye-opening thing. Whoa. okay. So he was being super kind to me but if I was like a black man riding through this area, then it could have been totally different. And it wasn't just that. I mean, there were other situations I witnessed as well— I mean, riding through a lot of areas of the country and just seeing the Northern parts— it wasn't like the South either. It was Northern parts and even California seeing Confederate flags, a lot of different places.

There was a man I met when I was riding from New York back to California and he was a black man. We were sharing stories and he said, "Where have you been camping at most nights?" And I said, "Oh, man, most nights, I just sleep in baseball fields." And he said, "Cops don't bother you?" And I said, "Yeah, well, sometimes they come but they usually just tell me to leave early in the morning." And this man looked at me and said, "Oh my gosh, man. Last week, I was staying in a campground where I was supposed to be staying and someone still called the cops on me."

Then, there was a moment I had in a rural area in Idaho. This guy in this big truck pulled over and he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "Oh, I'm just going to the next town." I was riding my

bike. In this part, I had a long beard and I was looking a little different than when I first started. And he said, "Where are you from?" "I'm from California." And he said, "Ooh, you shouldn't admit that to people around here." I said, "Okay." Then, he went, "No, we're all carrying guns around here." And then he just stared at me and slowly drove off.

**Scott**

That is creepy.

**Daniel**

Yeah, for sure. And that was an area where there were Confederate flags and things like that.

**Scott**

When you were setting up some of the shots of you riding, there's a still shot of you - the cameras in one place and you're just biking past. Now, I know the typical viewer might just look at that and think, "Yep, he's riding by." I look at that and I think, "You had to stop and set up the camera in that spot and then backtrack, like, 50 yards or so and then bike past it for the shot, and then go back and retrieve the camera and go on your way. So making this documentary really added to the difficulty. You're not just riding across the country. You had lots of other things to think about along the way. Was that always going through your mind - what the end product is going to be like?"

**Daniel**

Yeah, that was confusing at times because, in some ways, I'm trying to stay super engaged and present as far as just riding my bike and witnessing these things. At the same time, I was thinking, "Oh, this could be a good shot here." So I'd kind of stop the moment and set up my camera. Sometimes, I would set it up on a rock or something - just be resourceful and try to use what you can - and there'd be other times when I would stop and set up my drone and program my drone to follow me. It was kind of a blessing and a curse at the same time because, in some ways, when days were boring, it kind of gave me something to look forward to. If I was having a day where just the scenery wasn't changing very much or whatever, I would always be on the lookout for kind of a cool shot and I'd break out my drone and that would kind of give me a little energy. But at the same time, there were moments when I was just really present and having a great time and just having to stop and feel like I needed to film this shot. It kind of took me out of the moment a little bit.

**Scott**

And you were a one-man crew. It's not like you were bringing a film crew with you that could set up the shots and look at the dailies at the end of the day to see how it all went.

**Daniel**

Yeah. I really tried to. I really wanted to prove to myself that I didn't need a film crew. I mean, you and I, before we started the podcast, we were talking about that. There's something very empowering about knowing that you can do it all by yourself. We live in a time right now that is pretty cool where one person can literally just make their own movie, and it's really special. Also, again, I wanted it to be raw and real. The idea of bringing a crew with me would totally not be a true experience.

**Scott**

One night, it was around one o'clock in the morning. You were riding down the street looking for a place to stay, and you didn't even know where you were going to sleep that night. What happened that night?

### **Daniel**

I was riding through Patterson, New Jersey. Normally, I wouldn't stay in big cities, especially big cities with a lot of crime because it was obviously dangerous, but I met this wonderful woman named Elizabeth and she was from Columbia. I met her in front of a grocery store when I was panhandling and she was concerned about me. She said, "I'm concerned about you riding through this area. You can stay with me." And I thought, "Oh my God, this is such a beautiful opportunity. Of course, I'm going to take her up on it." So Elizabeth cooked me dinner. She lived in this very small apartment in a rough area of Patterson, New Jersey, and she was sharing all these beautiful stories with me about growing up in extreme poverty to where there were days when they didn't even have the money to buy rice. I was capturing that moment while having dinner with her. I was feeling so inspired about having this beautiful connection with this stranger. Also, just being able to be fortunate to receive so much kindness from someone was so amazing and just uplifting.

I'm about to go to sleep at midnight. Her daughter and her boyfriend come home. Her boyfriend instantly was just grilling me with questions. "What are you doing here? Who are you? Etc." Then, he started telling me about how dangerous this neighborhood is because of all the gang activities that are happening. He doesn't trust me. Elizabeth was saying, "No, please, he's fine. Let him stay. Leave him alone." But this person got into my face and then he shoved me. He said, "If you don't leave now, we're going to have a serious problem." He took my stuff and he literally just threw it out into the street." So, at that point, I had no choice. I just got out of there. It was really sad because Elizabeth was crying. She did this really kind act for somebody and the boyfriend definitely didn't trust me and wanted me there, so I said, "Okay, I'll leave."

So I was one in the morning and I was riding through Patterson, New Jersey, in literally gang neighborhoods where there are gang members on the street corners. And I was wearing bright green. I'm obviously not from there. I have all this gear on my bike.

### **Scott**

One thing in this picture that doesn't belong, right?

### **Daniel**

Exactly. So my first thought is, initially, I want to ride to the next town and get out of here. But then, once I was on the street and saw all the gang members, I thought, "I need to get out of this street within seconds because I'm going to get robbed or killed or who knows what's going to happen." So I found this old abandoned warehouse and I rode my bike back there. There were all these abandoned semi-trucks and I had a really bad vibe about sleeping back there but I thought, "Well, this gets me off the streets. I'm just going to have to make do with it." So I set up my tent in the corner of this warehouse or behind this warehouse.

I got woken up at 3 AM. I heard this big truck. At first, I could just hear the engine kind of idling close to my tent, so I woke up thinking, "What the hell is going on?" I had no idea. Then, I heard the truck start driving towards me slowly and my heart rate just started pounding. Again, I couldn't see what was going on. I just saw some lights going into my tent. Then, I heard the engine just revving, driving fast towards my tent. At that moment, I literally thought, like, "I'm getting run over. This is how I die. This is it." I've never had a moment like that ever in my whole

life. My hands were so sweaty. My heart was racing a hundred miles per hour. Then, I heard the truck stop right in front of my tent. I heard the door open and close. Then, I think, "Okay, so I'm not getting run over, but I'm going to get murdered or robbed or something's happening."

Then, a person yelled, "Get the fuck out!" At that point, I was so terrified. I've never been this terrified in my whole life because, again, I can't see what's going on and I just felt stuck in my tent. There's nowhere to go. There's nowhere to go.

**Scott**

And I should mention this for anyone listening, you recorded yourself in this and it's in the documentary. I mean, the fear in your voice and on your face is just obvious.

**Daniel**

Yeah. There's this moment a friend actually pointed out to me, if you pause the film, you can see just complete terror in my face. I've never had that expression before. So I thought to myself, "Okay, he told me to get the fuck out. I'm going to try to sound as non-confrontational as possible."

**Scott**

And you did that really well.

**Daniel**

Thank you. That was a survival tactic. I felt like this is what I needed to do at this moment. This is an instinctual move in some ways. So I unzipped the tent, lightened up my voice, and said, "Hey, I'm Daniel. How's it going?" I just saw two headlights just beaming into my face, so I couldn't see the person. So, I don't know where the person is and, most importantly, I don't know if they're holding a gun towards me. They might be pointing a gun at me, especially, again, considering the fact that this is a gang neighborhood in Patterson, New Jersey.

He said, "What are you doing here?" Again, I was talking to these headlights and trying to calm my voice, and I said, "I'm just crashing for the night." Absolutely terrifying moment. Then, the guy said, "Well, I'm a security guard. You can't be sleeping here." I felt like the weight of the world was just lifted off of my shoulders at that moment and I realized, "Okay, this person, they're not here to kill me, but they're patrolling the area." But that moment, just considering all those circumstances, was extremely traumatizing and I was not the same after. I still had to ride all the way back to California from New Jersey. After that, sleeping in all these strange places wasn't like an adventure anymore. It just felt scary after that.

**Scott**

What did you learn from this adventure?

**Daniel**

Man, there's so much that comes to mind. I mean, the first thing that really stands out to me is there were a lot of people who showed up in my life in moments when I really needed it, especially as my appearance started to change. One particular story really stands out that's tied into your question is I was in Oregon and, after seven months of panhandling, trying to find a safe place to sleep, trying to find a place to bathe, trying to get enough food and money, and being physically broken down, my body was really starting to ache and I was getting harassed more, and that was really wearing on me and I was just feeling so beaten up. I was standing on

the side of the road, just stretching my body, and this was the closest I came to quitting these couple of days.

I remember thinking, like, "I don't think I want to go on anymore. I'm just too exhausted." This person walked up to me and his name was Gary. Everybody else was walking by. I didn't have my sign out. I was not asking for anything. Gary picked up on the energy that I was putting out and he said, "Hey man, are you okay?" I said, "Yeah, man, I'm just kind of having a rough couple of days." He said, "Hold on a second, man. I want you to just stay here for a second." And he ran across the street to a grocery store and Gary came back with a bag full of groceries. He gave me a bag full of groceries and I wasn't asking for it. Again, my sign wasn't out but Gary picked up on the energy that I was putting out. I said, "Thank you, man."

And I started asking him, "What's your story? Where are you from, man? Where do you live? What's your story?" He said, "I live on the streets. I'm homeless." And I said, "What made you want to help me?" He said, "Because you look like you're going through a rough time." I truly believe that Gary because he'd faced a lot of hardships in his life. He was able to pick up on the energy when everybody else was passing by and he recognized the energy.

The thing is it wasn't about the food or money because I actually had some food that day. It was the fact that he saw that I was struggling and he showed up for me, and that's what I learned. Every day, we all have this super incredible opportunity to show up for somebody and it doesn't have to be giving food or money to someone who's homeless. It could be someone you work with. If you can tell their energy is off, just check in with them because that moment, for me—like, Gary changed my life just showing me that. It's really cool because I think, "Holy shit. We can all be that person who shows up for somebody and we can change their life." It's really cool that there's so much chaos in our world right now but one thing that we can always control, that we actually can control is how we treat each other, and we can all be a Gary to somebody.

### **Scott**

Yeah. That was the premise for this whole thing, right? I mean, there's so much chaos in the world and everybody's fighting each other, but there are still a lot of good people in this world. That encounter was proof of it.

### **Daniel**

Yeah, I totally agree with you. Another thing I learned from this experience is watching the news and listening to politicians and all the fear-mongering that's happening with all this, when you go out into the communities and actually talk to people, especially people who are different, I think it's really beneficial to learn to give them a chance to speak and listen to them, and then you have a better understanding, I think that the two things that happen are, first of all, there's less fear of those people who are different and then you realize we're actually maybe not that different. That's another thing I learned from this because, a lot of times, I was going into neighborhoods that I normally wouldn't go into and I was speaking to people who had different opinions, but it was so inspiring because I realized that we're actually not that different.

### **Scott**

Have you ever thought about doing this again?

### **Daniel**

I have, Yeah. And I go back and forth in it because it's interesting. Just yesterday, I was talking to this homeless man. He was panhandling on the street. Now, when I see people, I always just

want to hear their stories because living this lifestyle for seven months created so many interesting, unique opportunities that are so different from normal life. This man was 45 years old. He said he'd been homeless since he was eight years old because his mom used to beat him. When he said that, I was like, "Well, how are you getting by at eight?" He was like, "It was the 80s. I would go and I would tell people I needed a quarter to call my parents." That's how he would panhandle. He'd say, "I need to use the pay phone." He'd been homeless for 37 years and the amount of stories this person had was unbelievable and interesting. I said, "Well, do you eventually want to get into housing?" And he told me, he said, "That would be a waste of my life. Why would I go into housing now? This is what my life is meant to be. I'm meant to be out here."

**Scott**

That's his normal.

**Daniel**

That's his normal. And in some ways, it's really interesting because life is how you look at it. He brought the example. He's like, "Well, working in an office is a normal day job. But I'm living in a more instinctual way." And I thought that's pretty interesting. I was trying that in because I have thought about doing it again just for the sake of so many unpredictable things that happen. There's this crazy opportunity when you're really just going with the flow and just letting kind of the journey take its own route, it leads you on a lot of really beautiful experiences, and I think that it really gets you connected and present in the moment.

**Scott**

Yeah. I mean, you were thinking, after about seven months, you were worn out and tired and didn't want to keep going. I mean, for some people, that's their life. They don't have any choice.

**Daniel**

Yeah. And I can't even imagine how difficult it is for those people who are living that life every day. I can't even imagine.

**Scott**

For people who want to watch your documentary and your website, how can they find all that?

**Daniel**

Thank you for asking. yeah, so my film, which is called, we are all in this together. It's streaming on Amazon Prime on Apple TV and Google Play. My website is [weareallinthistogethermovie.com](http://weareallinthistogethermovie.com). And what I'd like to share is, in a couple of months, I'm going to be hitting the road and I'm going to be going to different cities across America and having live screenings of my movie in different theaters. We're going to be using the ticket sales from those showings to raise money for the local homeless shelters in the city that we're riding through. And yeah, I'd love to encourage anybody to check out the website. There'll be a list of dates on there that talk about what cities I'm going through and it'd be really cool to meet a listener. Maybe we can go for a bike ride or go for a walk and share some nice stories with each other and also talk about the podcast, talk about how we're both fans of this podcast because I've been listening to this podcast. I actually came across this podcast when I was traveling in Europe last year.

**Scott**

Really? I didn't know that. Okay.

**Daniel**

Yeah, that's pretty cool, man. I've been a fan of the podcast and it's a huge honor to be on here with you.

**Scott**

Well, it's an honor to have you here and you're going across the country. I assume you're not biking across the country. This is in a car or something, right?

**Daniel**

Yeah, I was tempted to do the bike ride, but I can hit way more cities in the car.

**Scott**

Yeah, for sure. And I know you're coming to Florida. Wherever you're coming to Florida, I want to know about it. I'm going to sign up and make sure I'm aware of when you're here because I definitely want to meet up with you - and go to the screening - and any listeners that are here. It'll be fun to get together.

**Daniel**

Absolutely. Yeah, that's what it's all about - connecting and supporting each other - right?

**Scott**

For sure. And you and I are a lot alike in that we both have a big heart for the homeless population. I do a lot of work with them here locally as well. What a great thing to be able to do - just go across the country, show your movie to people, raise money, and help the homeless people. You've got the ideal life now, I think.

**Daniel**

Thank you. And I can't say enough about just the people that I met along the way. They helped create this story and it kind of goes in line with as far as the movie tour. Like, when I left, I didn't know what I was doing as far as making a movie. And I would love to share with the listeners that I hardly had any film experience at all. I didn't know what I was doing. I was learning on the road but I think that, sometimes, if you have a creative idea, just go for it because you never know what could happen. For me, personally, sometimes, I would have self-doubt about certain things creatively because I thought, "Oh, I don't have any experience with that. So I won't be any good." This bike ride taught me that you don't have to have experience. You just got to go for it.

**Scott**

Yeah. I was surprised when I went to your website. I mean, the number of awards this film has won and, if you just keep scrolling, it's really gotten a lot of them.

**Daniel**

Thank you so much. I mean, it's so incredible. Just to be able to share your art with people by itself is amazing, and then the idea of winning is a huge honor. Again, that's why I can't say enough about these people I met. Man, I'm so grateful because of them sharing their stories—like, we all did it together. We all did it. It wasn't just me. It was those people who decided to be kind to me and to show up in my life. And then, all of a sudden, this story's out there. And in some ways, I'm so happy because it gets to celebrate them because they definitely deserve it.

**Scott**

I really enjoyed having that conversation with Daniel. He's such a genuine, down-to-earth person. And – I'm hoping to meet him in person in the not-to-distant future, because one of the cities he's planning to visit in his movie tour is St Petersburg, Florida. He hasn't yet finalized all the dates and the various cities he'll be visiting to screen the movie – but you can check his website for up to date information, and you can also email him. I'll have links to his website and his email address in the episode notes, at [WhatWasThatLike.com/174](http://WhatWasThatLike.com/174).

### **Amy**

Hi Scott, my name is Amy. I'm listening to the re-release of the episode Justin Found His Mother on Facebook. I am tearing up listening to it because I had the same exact experience a couple of years ago. I was adopted before I was even born. My first mother had decided she couldn't keep me for the same reasons as Justin's mother. She didn't have the resources to give me the life that she wanted. I grew up with a family that was very different from my personality. They're very awesome and very kind people. They gave me everything I needed to care for me, but it never felt like I had a mirror of who I am, my personality, and my quirks. I had never seen anyone that looked like me and my heart always yearned and ached to know the biological family.

I finally had the courage to try to find my– I found my mother on Facebook a few years before I even tried to contact her. I had to work up the courage to send her a message. So, I finally sent her a message. I think the same thing happened where it went to that inbox on Facebook when you're not friends with someone. My mother's probably in her 50s and couldn't figure that out for a while. So a year later, on the day that I was graduating from massage school, the very day that I was graduating, I got home and saw that she had replied and, yeah, it's just crazy. I just relate to everything that Justin is saying, all of the feelings, and it's nice to hear someone else talk about it because I don't know a lot of people who are adopted and don't know a lot of people that are adopted who have had positive stories reconnecting with their birth family, and Justin reminds me of my own very much.

I finally met my birth mom a couple of years ago. I flew out to the Midwest from the East Coast to meet my birth mom, my half siblings - because she had a couple of kids after me - uncles, my birth grandfather, and my birth grandmother, cousins. They were all so kind. So cool just to finally feel the resonance of people who not only look like me, even though that's big, but it's just a certain feeling when you're around people that you've come from and that you're related to.

I've realized finally that it's actually very special to be adopted because, if you grow up with your biological family, whoever you grow up with, you have a tendency to get annoyed by and we get under each other's skin and you see the good and the bad and it can be harder to sometimes appreciate those who are close to us day-in and day-out - not that we don't love them. I feel like when I met my birth family, we didn't have that day-in and day-out frustration with each other. We just have this blank slate to build a positive relationship on. Also, it has made me appreciate my birth family more. It's like I have two families that love me equally and I love them equally. My heart feels so full after a lifetime of feeling really lonely, misunderstood, lost, and kind of hurt. I didn't know who I was and I had no reference for my identity, which was really hard, and I felt that way for as long as I can remember.

It's like a reward after going through all of that. I now know who I am. I have two families. I hope that there are more people out there who have had the same experience. Thank you so much for listening to me and for sharing the stories that you do. God bless Justin and his birth mom and a newfound family.

**Scott**

If you haven't heard that episode yet, it's episode 170, and it came out on March 15, 2024, and it's titled "Justin found his mother on Facebook".

And we have a new Raw Audio episode – Raw Audio 40 just went live. The Raw Audio series are bonus episodes that include actual 911 audio and the stories that go with that call. In this episode, you'll hear a man calling because his mother can't breathe – and he calls more than once:

**Male 1**

Sorry, say that again?

**911 Operator**

Tell me exactly what's happened?

**Male 1**

She's struggling to breathe.

**911 Operator**

Oh, okay.

**Scott**

A husband and wife are surprised when someone is trying to break into their home

**Female 1**

He can only shoot if he comes in, right?

**Scott**

And, a man calls to turn himself in and get help for the elderly couple he was holding hostage

**Male 2**

First of all, I'm a piece of shit. I need medical assistance out here for this elderly couple. I'm turning myself in.

**Scott**

You can binge all 40 episodes when you sign up to support the podcast. And not just that – you get to listen to all the What Was That Like episodes without any ads! And you can try it out for free –

If you're listening on an iPhone, just go to What Was That Like and click on Try Free. On Android, go to [WhatWasThatLike.com/PLUS](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/PLUS) to try it out.

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

And it's time for the Listener Story! You're gonna hear this story because a listener, just like you, said "hey, I had something interesting happen to me – why don't I record that in a little 5 or 10 minute story on my phone, and send it to Scott!" And that's what they did. And that's what you

should do. Just record a story of something that happened to you, and email it to me at [Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com](mailto:Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com).

This week's story is about a scary encounter – at the grocery store.

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

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(Listener Story)

April 23rd, 2018 started off as a typical busy Monday morning for me. The kids had school at 8 and I was due to work at nine. My husband wasn't home because he was working as a truck driver and he was out of town. I was having my morning coffee and getting ready to make the kids their lunches when I realized we were out of lunch meat. I thought, "Oh no, I have to make their lunches. How am I going to do this?" Because I also realized we were out of milk and they're going to want their cereal. So I thought to myself, "Okay, well Albertsons supermarket is just down the street. I will go get dressed for work, run down there, get it, be back."

So I was getting dressed, which turned out to be a pretty important part of this story because it ended up saving my life. I was a dog groomer at the time. When you're grooming dogs, there is a lot of hair and I really wanted to wear my leggings because they're so comfy, but I knew that they would just get so hairy because whenever I got done working, it looked like I came out of a blizzard of hair. So I just threw my jeans on and thought, "This'll do." My son's just getting out of the shower and I tell him, "Hey, your little sister's still sleeping. I'm going to run down to Albertsons to get milk and lunch meat. I'll be right back." So I head out to the car and I remember thinking, "Oh my God, I don't have my cell phone." But then I thought, "Well, fine, because I'll be right back." It was still on the charger from the night before.

I pulled into the parking lot and I was really happy. There weren't that many people there and I thought, oh good, I can make it in and out and I can get on with my day. I got the milk, went to the lunch meat aisle, and I'm like, "Okay, which kind am I gonna get? There are so many different kinds. Do I want Turkey? Do I want ham?" Next thing I knew, I looked down the aisle and there's a man coming - a much older man - and I thought to myself, "Oh, I'll just move out of the way." Cause I could tell he wanted to go look at the same place I was. He was looking at lunch meat.

I was just standing there and he said, "Excuse me, do you know what time it is?" I said, "Oh my gosh, sir, I'm so sorry. I don't have my cell phone. I do know it's probably about 6.15 because the store just opened." Before I could even get anything else out, he lunged at me and hit me in the stomach. It was terrifying. It was so traumatic. It hurt so bad. It was, like, a stinging, stabbing pain like when you get punched in the gut. That's kind of what it felt like. I was like, "Oh my God." I kind of looked up at him and I started to cry. And I said, "Why would you do that? Why would you punch me?" He looked at me and he held up his hand, and I saw a knife, and he said, "I just stabbed you." And I was like, "Oh my God."

So I was, like, running - because he's coming after me. He was, like, running after me up and down the aisles. I was trying to find somebody. I was screaming. I was sitting there thinking, "Where is help?" Finally, I got down the end of one aisle and I saw a worker. It was a man that was working in the meat department and I ran up to him, "Sir, please. Oh my God, please help

me. This man just hit me and he's following me. He's chasing me." The meat man, when I was telling him, he turned and there's the crazy old man staring at us at the end of the aisle.

The meat man stepped in front of me to protect me, and he said, "Sir, what is the problem?" And the man said, "I stabbed her, and I would stab you too." At this point, I was just, like, going hysterical because I was like, "What is going on?" The man got on his walkie talkie and said something. The next thing you know, two other workers come. By this point, the man was flailing the knife around in the air. They knocked the knife down, they knocked him to the ground.

After that, the meat man turned to me and he said, "Ma'am, are you okay?" And I was thinking, "No, I'm not okay. This crazy old man just punched me." And the guy said, "Are you sure he didn't stab you?" And I was like, "No." And I looked down and there's blood. At this point, I was freaking out, screaming, crying. The man was grabbing towels to help me. Then, the police came. They questioned me. They questioned the guy. The guy was still yelling, "I stabbed her, and I will stab you too!" It is insane.

Then, the ambulance comes and they take me to the hospital. Luckily, the knife only went in about an inch and a half. The doctor did tell me that what saved my life was the waistband of my jeans. So had I worn those leggings that day, the knife would have gone all the way in. I mean, I could have died and it's still so shocking to this day that that happened. They did have to do a lot of stitches.

I was happy that they did charge the man with felony assault with a weapon. It turned out he was 74. About a week later, I did find out they sentenced him to Warm Springs State Psychiatric Hospital here in Montana because they did find him mentally ill, which isn't surprising.

The only thing that I found really awkward was when the police questioned him about why he did this, he said that he was homeless and that he was very angry at the VA. I still to this day do not know what would push somebody to go hurt somebody else because of that, but I'm just so grateful that I made it and that I'm okay. The police did call my sister. So she was able to come take care of my kids for me while I was going through everything. It's very traumatic. I'm lucky to be alive. I'm much more aware of my surroundings. Lots of therapy. But I'm okay.

The main thing of this whole story is this happened but I'm okay. Even now, every year, my co-workers celebrate my Stabiversary on April 23rd. They usually get me a cake from the Albertsons where I was stabbed at. Usually, they'll say something like, "We're so glad you survived." And I just take it as that. I'm okay and I'm so thankful.