

1 GVP17 Johathan Brostoff

2 D: So, please state your name.

3 J: I'm Jonathan Brostoff.

4 D: And Jonathan, how old are you?

5 J: I am 35 years old.

6 D: Wow! You look good for 35. (laughter) You look like a teenager.

7 J: Thank you, I get that a lot. I, uh, we'll see, I got my, my new baby, Boaz, uh, in the world so  
8 we'll see how quickly that ages me. How many, how many more grey hairs come along.

9 (laughter)

10 D: Have you personally uh, been affected by gun violence in any way?

11 J: Yeah, unfortunately.

12 D: And, what, can you please share your story?

13 J: Sure, well, I've had a couple instances. I've personally had uh, guns pulled on me a couple  
14 times and robbery attempts, but also um, you know, had a friend that we actually just passed the  
15 uh, uh, anniversary of who committed suicide by gun um, when he was a, who, who, this was  
16 someone who would regularly come to my house for a Sunday night card game I hosted. And he,  
17 you know, mentioned he wasn't feeling too well, um, when I asked if, if he was coming over that  
18 night. So, yeah. Um and, those, those are the most recent uh, although unfortunately, there's been  
19 some other examples. Um, especially around suicide. So, yeah. Uh, mmmm.

20 D: Uh, could you go more in depth maybe about whichever story you feel the most comfortable  
21 with? Because we wanna sort of, walk the listeners through, uh, the experience.

22 J: Uh, sure. Well I guess I can start with uh, my uh, first experience I 'member and I was about  
23 eighteen or so. Um, I was dropping off a friend of mine, actually she was a friend since we were

24 in elementary school together and we were doin' the same uh, AmeriCorps project and I was  
25 dropping her off at this house uh, over by the northwest side. And then, uh, when she left the car  
26 I didn't, um, actually, I don't know why, I had a big Volvo Station wagon back then, I didn't  
27 lock the, the um, passenger car door for some reason, I normally did, for some reason I didn't  
28 that night. Anyway, I pulled off and um, I was on uh, kind of a smaller side street and I was  
29 pullin' off on to a main road and the car in front of me had stopped. And when they uh, stopped  
30 the, they, they stopped in a manner where I couldn't like, drive around and like, they stopped me  
31 from drivin'. And the guy in the passenger seat ran out and then ran into my car and opened up  
32 the car door. And he had a gun. And he, um, can I cuss on here?

33 D: Uh.

34 J: Okay, I'll say somethin' else.

35 D: Okay. (laughter)

36 J: He had a, he had a gun and he uh, just screamed at me like d-, you know, "Drive m'er f'er and  
37 drive!" You know. And I was like okay, you know. And the other car had taken off at that point  
38 so I could drive again. And he was very obviously on drugs, you know, I-it-it was obvious to me  
39 from his mannerisms and stuff. He was on drugs, like he was kind of shaky and very agitated and  
40 very anxious and talking a mile a minute about all sorts of, you know, random stuff. And he was,  
41 he had a little bit of, he was, like, had a lot of spittle almost like he was kind of foaming. At that  
42 point he was you know, very upset, very agitated, you could tell. And he was talking about all  
43 sorts of stuff and we were driving and I just, the first thing that came to my head was just to start  
44 talking about all this Bible stuff. So, he was talking and I was driving and he was being kind of  
45 loud and then I started talking over him and I was just screaming, you know, I was talking about,  
46 you know, how Abraham was known for his hospitality and kindness and you know, washing the

47 feet in the four corners of ten, blah, blah, blah. And I was just, whatever my Rabbi had told me  
48 that week, that came to mind for whatever reason. So, I was talking over him, then he started  
49 talking over me. And now we're like, and he's very close to me physically and we're like  
50 screaming over each other. And I'm just screaming all this Bible stuff at the top of my lungs.  
51 And then he just sits back and listens and then, and I'm talkin' about, you know, and I, and I, and  
52 he was saying stuff like, you know, "I'm a good guy. I don't wanna be doin' this stuff, but I have  
53 to. And dadada..." You know, before he stopped talking. So, finally, you know, I was just like  
54 onto, I-I said to him, "I know you're a good man, know you're a good person. You don't wanna  
55 do this. You don't wanna hurt me, you don't wanna hurt anyone. I know you're a good person.  
56 You probably went to church growing up. And you know about Abraham, you know about the  
57 Bible, you don't wanna do this. You wanna be a Godly man. But you're in this situation, you  
58 gotta do it, and you know, where, you know, where do you live? Where do you live, man?  
59 Where, where do you stay? Where do you live by?" And he told me he stayed with his auntie,  
60 which happened to be actually very close to where we were. So, I drove over to the area, to the  
61 block that he had said. And then, um, he, you know, I just kept talkin' all this Bible stuff about  
62 being a good person, and you know, of Abraham and Moses and leading people and whatever.  
63 And I um, at that time, we had these parking meters where you actually had to use coins, now  
64 obviously you just use your phone or whatever for the most part, but back then, it was all coins.  
65 So, and so I don't smoke, but in the dash, in the ash um, you know, where you ash out your  
66 cigarette, part of the Volvo, you know, I kept a bunch of quarters in there. And 'cause you wanna  
67 pay for stuff. So, I opened it up, I took out like probably couple dollars' worth of quarters,  
68 maybe. And I was like, "This is all I got. I wish I had more money for you. I don't have any  
69 more money, this is all I got. You know, I'm sorry I don't have more for you. But you know, you

70 go with, you're a good man, you do good stuff, dada..." Just talked a mile a minute, you know,  
71 so he couldn't get any words in. And then I like flipped open the door and kind of like just you  
72 know, pushed him out and drove off and came out unharmed, thank God.

73 D: Wow.

74 J: Yeah. So, that was uh, my first memory where I got held up at gunpoint. But somethin' just  
75 told me, just talk over, you know, "This guy wants to take control of the situation, you take  
76 control of the situation. Talk over this dude, talk Bible stuff 'cause it's probably like, gonna  
77 bring him to a place in his memory or in his childhood and went to," you know, in my mind I'm  
78 thinkin' all this stuff really quickly and you know, "If he's thinkin' about God stuff, he won't  
79 wanna hurt me as much." And it doesn't seem like he's actually just wants to hurt me, it seems  
80 more so he's just in a desperate situation and he just, you know, in the, in the situation. And  
81 maybe there's some drug component to it, but I don't think he's actively out to, to harm me. I  
82 think he's just in this situation and behavin' as such. And so, you know, figure it out and get him  
83 out of the car as quick as possible. And that was what I thought like, right away when I saw his  
84 gun, like all those thoughts quickly went through my head and so, that's, yeah, luckily wasn't  
85 harmed, that's how it went down and never saw him again.

86 D: Wow.

87 J: Yeah.

88 D: From the experience, did it make you be more hesitant in going outside or travelin' around  
89 town or that side of town?

90 J: No, although, um, again I, it-it was, it, the-a-a, I will say, did thi-I was like, "Why didn't I lock  
91 the door, normally I lock the door." 'Cause we were in a, it was a, you know, I can't remember  
92 exactly what streets I was drivin' off, but it was around [Walnut Hill...], which at that time was,

93 it's still you know, kind of a rough area, but um at that time it was as well. Uh, so normally I  
94 would've have locked my car door. But that was the only thought. No, I mean no, I-it didn't, it  
95 didn't strike me as not to drive anymore, nothin' like that, that I'll get car jacked, um, or  
96 anything of that nature. It's just, more so my, my afterthought was that w-we have a system that I  
97 grew up in, that I tha-, you know, thankfully, from my perspective was very privileging growing  
98 up in where I never had to, you know struggle you know, in that way socioeconomically, worry  
99 about nothin' like that. But we've kind of removed a lot of the you know, humanity, for decades  
100 and decades and generations and generations from aspects of our community through  
101 socioeconomic violence, through demonization in the media, through all these other things and  
102 once you move that humanity, all that's left is insanity. And I don't mean that in a stigmatizing  
103 way, I mean that to say like, truly that-that the madness that can take over and that sometimes  
104 that's gonna produce some really tough situations and again, I don't, I never saw that this person  
105 was out there maliciously trying to harm me, even though, you know, he, you know stuck, you  
106 know, a gun in my face, you know, quite literally. I think it was more so it just struck me as this  
107 guy isn't actually tryna hurt no-h-hurt anybody, he's just, in a tough situation and there might be  
108 drugs introduced in the situation too, which exacerbates it and makes it even more kind of  
109 anxiety ridden. So, you know, just take control and be safe and don't, don't let him drive the  
110 narrative. 'Cause if he takes control of the situation, then we're gonna drive somewhere I don't  
111 wanna be at and end up in a situation I don't wanna be, end up in. And you know, he's gonna  
112 you know, take my car or see if I got money or maybe be upset that I don't have more money,  
113 dadada. So, don't let this dude take control, he's not, he shouldn't be in the driver seat. He's not  
114 of the right state of mind. You have a right state of mine, you take the driver seat.  
115 Metaphorically, you know.

116 D: Wow.

117 J: And literally, I guess.

118 D: I-I'm just amazed that you did that. (laughter)

119 J: Yeah. Well, I always been tiny, you know, I'm a small dude, so you know, g-g you know g-  
120 you gotta, you gotta be able to talk sometimes and be able to work your way out of situations,  
121 being so small. So, yeah, maybe it's part of that. (laughter)

122 D: What would you say uh, we could do to help lower gun violence in Milwaukee?

123 J: Oh man, I-I-again, I think that there's, there's a lot of violence that comes before the gun  
124 violence. Like I said, there's socioeconomic violence and that's real. There's uh, political  
125 violence, there's exclusion of certain communities, stuff like that, and to the point where it  
126 actually comes to a gun violence situation, a lot of stuff has already had to happen to get at that  
127 place, in my opinion. So, I'm not as interested in the dealing with the aftermath. A lot of people  
128 will say, "Well, we need to punish people more. Or lock people up more, and dadada..." And  
129 first of all, by the time you get to that, it's not actually a justice system. That's not justice.  
130 Because s-s, you, s-s, God forbid that someone that you know, you know, if one of my family  
131 members gets shot, the person that shoots them loses the rest of their freedoms. That doesn't do  
132 justice to him, it doesn't restore my th-th-the, m-my family member is lost. I'm not gettin' that  
133 person back. That's not justice. Justice would be like, that didn't you know, and, and best to  
134 prevent it in the first place. So, to a certain degree, I-I'm not as much on the whole, like, lock  
135 everyone up and do more dama-, you know, like criminalize everything like this and that.  
136 Because we've been doing that for generations now and it hasn't worked. I think the prevention  
137 side is, is much more appropriate. And I think there's ways you can work that, uh, whether it's  
138 um, more access to good paying jobs, whether it's uh, more access to uh, better educational

139 systems that lead to better educational outcomes, whether it's better public transit and  
140 multimodal transit that can get people to and from their jobs and other important uh, ventures in  
141 the community better, uh, whether it's better access to healthcare, nutrition; I think all those are  
142 factors and there's no one answer. Um, but it's gotta be all those in a total reinvestment. And we  
143 find hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars in corporate welfare projects constantly,  
144 where people who are super rich, b-b, get paid tons of cash just to be even more rich at the  
145 expense of the rest of us. That comes out of our schools, that comes out of our university system,  
146 that comes out of our economic development for the community and gets siphoned off into their  
147 pockets or to the Cayman Islands and they don't have to pay their fair share. In fact, they're not  
148 only not paying their fair share, their getting theirs from us on top of it, even though they're the  
149 ones who need it the least. And I would like a fundamental realignment of not only our tax code,  
150 but how all of those quote-unquote "incentive packages" are done in the first place. 'Cause if we  
151 wanted to, we could find a way to give every single family in Milwaukee at least a \$40,000 a  
152 year job, if they wanted it. And that would have a significant reduction in harm and-and-and  
153 preventing harm uh, uh, very quickly in our community. Um, if we wanted to, we could say,  
154 "We're going to make sure not, no classroom in, in any public school in Milwaukee has more  
155 than eighteen students per teacher." And those kids are gonna get their individual time because  
156 that's the ratio that's statistically proven to be one of the best as far as outcomes. And also,  
157 specifically with the Sage Program um, um, we first see the racial disparities that we've become  
158 uh, known for. So, I think that those are the sorts of solutions I'd look to as opposed to what  
159 everyone wants to do, the quick answer, they'll just lock 'em all up. Well, we been lockin' 'em  
160 all up and it's not working. It doesn't work. You know, we have not, we-we-we're one of the uh,

161 best at locking people up in the world, we're internationally famous for it. And it has not solved  
162 the issue of gun violence.

163 D: You're right.

164 J: Yeah.

165 D: Uh, what would you say to someone who recently experienced gun violence? Uh, how they  
166 could overcome the experience if it's weighing that person down?

167 (pause)

168 J: I would say I'm sorry. Uh, and it's a horrible thing that s-should not happen and you don't  
169 deserve. As far as how to deal with it emotionally, I mean, I'm still dealing, you know, like I said  
170 some of the recent suicides in my life of people who I was you know, relatively close with uh,  
171 and very close with was um, something that, I don't know if you ever deal with it in that sense,  
172 in the way that it kind of, it's not, you know, it's always with you. And maybe the pain comes  
173 and goes or you have moments where you remember stuff, but it doesn't escape you because it's,  
174 it and it shouldn't 'cause it's not natural, um, but through community and through finding other  
175 people that have shared experiences and, and being able to uh, kind of connect and, and build  
176 that community. I think there's a lot of, a lot of strength to be gleaned. And I think it's important  
177 to keep building and, and, and building uh, um, more community in the, in the, because really  
178 what it is is uh, one of the worst things you can do to a person. One of the worst, you know, we,  
179 we have the most controlled, um aspect of our society is what? Prison, right? That's where you  
180 have total control over people, right? And in that, the worst thing they legally do to you, is what?  
181 They put you in solitary, right? Meaning they separate you from other people, and death is the  
182 ultimate separation from other people. And so, life is the answer to it. So, building community,  
183 being around other people, building that sort of, uh, uh, relationships where you can, you can



184 connect with others and not isolate yourself and not kind of beat yourself up so much. That's  
185 what I would say, as far as what's helped me out. But, um, but it's terrible. And I would first and  
186 foremost just say I'm sorry.

187 D: Do you think there is a way that um, you could prevent suicide by gun?

188 J: Yeah, uh, there's definitely. In fact, uh, the um, um, um, I'm, I been working with a mother  
189 uh, uh, whose son was my friend, uh, most recently on some stuff and there, there, there, there is  
190 legislative release on some ideas. So, we have such as, um, red flag laws, but uh, yeah, I mean, I,  
191 I, I think there's a myriad of things. One, you have to be able to remove the threat when you're  
192 aware of it, so taking the gun out of that situation. And actually, that was the last thing that he  
193 wrote, he said, "It's really messed up that someone like me, with my mental health issues," Um,  
194 'cause he was goin' through some depression and stuff I think, and he says, you know, like um,  
195 "someone like me going through this, you know, really shouldn't have access to a gun. Fix that."  
196 You know, that was his last wish, you know, when he was dying. You know, it was that he  
197 shouldn't have to have this suffered upon other people, what happened to him type stuff. So,  
198 anyway um, you know, so, from that perspective, yeah. And then also I think uh, you know,  
199 there's other aspects to it too. Why is someone in that mind frame? Why should they get to be in,  
200 you know, what's, what's happening where they're getting to that mentality and that mind set?  
201 And what interventions are there? What systems in society can we set up that can intervene? And  
202 what I mean is, uh, can there be more mental health supports around the community? Can there  
203 be more, uh, access to, um, uh, positive influences where you know, there's more mentorships,  
204 there's more, again, it's just connecting. Can there be less isolation, more community? And now,  
205 it's exacerbated because we're living in an era of social media, where we're seeing this  
206 completely false representation of other people's lives. They're taking the best filtered pictures.

207 They look amazing, they're with all their beautiful, attractive friends. And we're sitting at home,  
208 late at night, isolated, by our self, looking at our phone, seeing this play out and it's, and it's  
209 damaging and it's hurtful. And again, it's that isolation. So, um, I think again, re-re-pping on  
210 the community side of things and the prevention and access and healthy relationships um, is a  
211 pretty big component of it.

212 D: Wow. Is there any last thing you'd like to add?

213 J: (pause) I think if, let's see is there any last thing I'd like to add? I'd like to say to anyone  
214 listening, uh, thank you for your interest in this subject and go home and think about what you  
215 can do in your life to help prevent more gun violence. And whether that's talking to your  
216 legislature, uh, legislator, whether that's meeting with um, some community leaders, whether  
217 that's more engagement uh, with family, whether you come up with some idea we hadn't even  
218 thought of or talked about yet, um, think about what you can do to be a help. And then go do it.  
219 Because if you're listening to this, it shows that you're interested, um, but the second part of that,  
220 is, is taking action and, and actually affecting it. We need all hands on deck because there is a  
221 public health crisis, an epidemic that is um, hitting our nation and, and, and we have the tools to  
222 deal with, but we need people like you to step up and go out and, and do it. So, please do. And  
223 thank you again so much for your interest in this and for listening to us.

224 D: Thank you!

225 J: Thank you.

226 D: That was great.

227 J: Yeah?