

Today's episode may include content that audience members may find disturbing. While every episode of Zuzu: All Grown Up is uplifting and encouraging, today we'll be discussing a tragic event that gave way to an inspiring story. Please review today's episode before allowing children to listen or watch.

Seth: We honor the extraordinary courage of Wendi Winters, a journalist who made the ultimate sacrifice during the Capital Gazette newsroom shooting in Annapolis. Her longtime friend, Paul Donnelly, joins us to share Wendi's story, her activism, her passion for community journalism, and the selfless act that saved lives. Stay with us.

Karolyn: Today's topic, newsroom reporter Wendi Winters, a hero in the hearts of survivors. This is about an active shooter incident in the newsroom of the Capital Gazette. Wendi lost her life, saving the lives of fellow journalists.

Seth: Today's guest is Paul Donnelly, a playwright and close friend of the late Wendi Winters, one of the five journalists killed in the 2018 Capital Gazette shooting. Wendi was more than a reporter. She was a theater lover, Red Cross advocate, community leader, and mother of four. When an armed assailant stormed her newsroom, Wendi didn't run. She charged forward, slowing the shooter and saving lives. In today's conversation, Paul helps us remember Wendi, not just for how she died, but for how she lived. Paul, thank you for being with us. Karolyn, over to you.

Karolyn: Today, we have a very interesting person. His name is Paul Donnelly. But before we begin, we'd like to let our listeners know that the story they're about to hear is an emotional one about gun violence in the workplace.

It is also a story of a brave journalist who is a hero in the eyes of many for her unselfish act of saving her co-workers and the loss of her life as a result. If during this interview, you need to speak to a mental health professional, please contact 911 for assistance.

Well, Paul, you have a very compelling story to tell, do you not?

Indeed, I do. Wendi was an extraordinary human being who died in a very tragic way. She was at the Capital Gazette newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland.

She was one of five journalists killed in an assault on the newsroom. She is credited with saving the lives of some of her colleagues because she had just been through an active shooter drill. And so following the instructions of that drill, she attached the shooter using her trash can and her recycling bin.

And that slowed him down enough to allow some of her colleagues to get into hiding. He could have taken a lot more lives than he did had she not acted. And it was pretty harrowing for the family at the time because, of course, there was all kinds of news coverage immediately of the shooting, but not an immediate identification of the victims.

So the kids all were on tenterhooks for several hours until Wendi was finally identified as one of the victims, which is just a horrifying moment for the kids and for me. Can you share how you became friends before her life-changing day? We met in 1970 at a high school production of *Witness for the Prosecution*.

She had a relatively small role and I had a totally minuscule role. We had lots of times to hang out and bond during the rehearsal process. One funny story from that time, she gave me a nickname that has stuck to this day in the family.

She walked up to me at one point and announced, I'm going to call you Piggy, like the character in *Lord of the Flies*. I was not offended to be called Piggy. There were mirrors in my home.

I knew that I bore a resemblance. But I was very offended that she felt she needed to explain the reference. You know, I was extremely well-read and extremely proud of being well-read and couldn't believe that she felt she needed to tell me where the nickname came from.

But that has stuck and the kids all call me Uncle Piggy. You were in high school. You spent some time doing productions while attending school.

So how did her love for theater arts continue as she grew older? She was an avid theater goer throughout her life. Toward the end of her life, she became a reviewer for a publication called DC Theater Arts, which is a website that covers theater in the DC metropolitan area, reviewing most shows that go up and providing profiles of actors, directors, theater companies. It's really a one-stop theater resource for the DC community.

Karolyn: As the years passed, we understand Wendi became a mother, an editor, community member, reporter. Can you share what those days were like for Wendi?

Wendi was always busy. She was someone who didn't know how to relax. She was always engaged in some kind of activity.

She was a reporter for the Capital Gazette, active in the Red Cross. She sponsored 11 blood drives biannually. She organized and ran an event called PR Bazaar, which was an opportunity for small businesses and nonprofits in the community to meet with journalists and editors and media savvy people to learn how to get their messages out better.

The Bazaar was structured as initially a presentation from a journalist or a media mogul, and then what was called equivalent to speed dating, where there would be journalists or media people seated at tables, and the nonprofit community-based people would go from table to table and meet with each of the media people.

It was quite the active and engaged event. She was also involved in the Naval Academy, U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1940 alumni group.

Her father was a member of that group until he died in 1997. She helped to keep the group going, helped to keep, as the members age, helped to keep them connected with one another and remain connected to the Academy. She was also an avid watercolorist.

We have all kinds of paintings of her sisters, of her kids, of landscapes.

Karolyn: Wow. She was very talented. We also heard that she loved the holidays, especially Christmas.

Yes, she did. Did you hear how she treated her coworkers with her unique Christmas cookies? She was famous or perhaps infamous for her Christmas cookies. They were chocolate covered Oreos dipped in white chocolate and sprinkled with crushed candy canes. They were quite the sweet treat. She would give packages of them to all of her colleagues and to friends in the community.

When I lived in the DC area, I was a recipient. I moved away, unfortunately not able to get cookies for a number of Christmases thereafter. She was also very engaged.

She had a publication called The Massive Missive, which she sent out every Christmas. It was exploded variation of the typical family Christmas letter, but this was full of her ryness and her enthusiasm, lots of photographs. It went to an audience of literally hundreds who we all looked forward to getting it every year.

Since she died, the kids have kept it going. So The Massive Missive, with detailing their activities for the year, still goes out to that large audience. They kept The Massive Missive going as part of their tribute to her.

Karolyn: Being a journalist isn't always easy. Getting the right story and all the facts associated with it. Wendi and her coworkers were a close team, right?

She worked very closely with a number of her coworkers and her editors. It was a small group, so they were very cohesive.

Karolyn: Well, that's pretty wonderful. Is there any way that you can sort of tell us about the training part of the job for Wendi? She had been to shooter training, hadn't she?

Yes, just actually weeks before the attack. I'm not sure what the shooter training entailed, but I know part of it entailed being willing to confront the assailant, which is what she did. Maybe you could describe to us what happened that day. The assailant newsroom door was locked.

It was a glass door and it was locked. He shot open the door. He shot and killed the receptionist immediately and then started working his way through the newsroom, just firing round after round after round.

And Wendi, fairly early in his assault, wanted to confront him. And as I say, she had her recycling bin in one hand and her trash can in the other. And she just went at him and slowed him down, which enabled some of her colleagues to get into better hiding places.

He ultimately killed Rebecca, the receptionist, Wendi, and three other colleagues. There were a total of five people killed in the attack. It was the largest mass murder in the history of the city of Annapolis and the largest number of journalists killed in America.

Karolyn: Could have been worse had it not been for her.

Oh, absolutely.

Karolyn: What was it like for co-workers like you who survived the shooting?

For her co-workers, it was very traumatic. The newsroom was shut up, so they had no access to their computers or their records or anything, but they still managed to get out a paper the next day. Obviously, the paper covered the shooting fairly extensively.

But they were universally praised for not missing a day of reporting and not missing a day of getting the paper out. The people were so impressed with that effort, the paper received a special Pulitzer Prize citation the following year.

Karolyn: What stopped the shooter?

I don't actually know. I don't know whether he ran out of rounds or whether he just gave up emotionally. He didn't kill himself. He was taken into custody.

Karolyn: So perhaps the police got him before killing people?

That could be.

Karolyn: They retained him, didn't they?

He was arrested and tried and convicted. This world today is kind of scary.

Karolyn: So how did they manage to get the newspaper published after that? I mean, the morning after, was it hard?

It was an enormous effort and very emotionally trying for everyone involved. They just decided that it would be better tribute to their colleagues to power through and get the paper out than to take a day off to deal with their feelings. I think many of the people who survived were traumatized and the trauma came out for them later and their grief was delayed because they had to focus on getting the paper out. But they had to face it sometime. They never went back into that newsroom. They were put in other spaces. That newsroom has never been used for paper since.

Karolyn: The journalists were named Times Magazine's Person of the Year 2018, and the shooting survivors were featured on the magazine cover.

That must have been such an honor of their strength and resilience. How proud Wendi would have been that they carried the story forward?

She would have been thrilled to see them recognized. Her generosity of spirit was such that she was always interested in seeing the people around her uplifted. As you might imagine, the people in that photograph had a great deal of ambivalence about the award, about the honor, because the honor was rooted in the loss of their colleagues.

Karolyn: What led to the founding of the Wendi Winters Foundation?

Her kids established it in her memory to make sure that her memory was honored beyond just the way she died, but that all of her contributions to the community were known and celebrated. The foundation is to celebrate community journalism, prevention of gun violence, and supporting the blood drives of the American Red Cross. The American Red Cross was really Wendi's great passion beyond her family and the paper.

Karolyn: Well, who's been the backbone of its existence?

The foundation is Wendi's four children, her daughter-in-law, Katie, and me. It's been a small and very emotionally committed group.

Karolyn: I can imagine. Dedication from the heart, one might say. Deeply. How are the community partners selected to receive any funding or service from the foundation?

Community partners are selected based on their connection to Wendi's passions in her life. The current community partners are the American Red Cross. We have a cadre of wonderful, dedicated volunteers led by Laura Thatcher-Shrank who have continued the blood drive in Wendi's honor. To date, they've collected 2,498 units of blood, which the Red Cross estimates has saved 7,494 lives. We encourage people to go to and if they're local to Annapolis, enter for Wendi in the search for a blood bank window. But we also absolutely encourage people all over the country to

The series is focused on theatre companies that serve or are founded by or support those communities. And then finally, we have continued the PR Bazaar. The first PR Bazaar following Wendi's death was held in June of 2019, almost a year after her murder. It was supported or organized by some community partners, supported by Maryland Hall.

Karolyn: Is there any contact information you can give us?

We gave up our 501c3 status. The PR Bazaar is promoted widely throughout PRSA mailing lists and through coverage in the Capital Gazette, so it's pretty widely known in the Annapolis community when it's occurring. For DC Theatre Arts, absolutely, contributions are accepted and the articles can be researched. It's at dctheatrearts.org.

Karolyn: How has Wendi's family kept her memory alive as life goes on?

Well, certainly through the work of the foundation and just, she's so present in all of our lives. Her daughter Montana, who's her third child, her birthday was a day short of a month after the killing.

The killing was June 28th and Montana's birthday is July 27th. She wrote an editorial for the Capital Gazette on her first birthday without her mother. It was very tender, dealt a lot with her survivor guilt. That's one way of keeping her memory alive. Any family occasion that's celebrated, she is celebrated and carried deep in our hearts. I'm sure she'd be there forever.

Karolyn: Did she ever know her grandchildren?

She did not. She was able to attend some major family occasion before she passed.

Two of her children, Phoenix and Montana, are graduates of the Naval Academy. She was able to attend both of their graduations. Yeah, it's pretty extraordinary to have one child go to the Naval Academy, but to have two is just almost inconceivable. And Phoenix got married the summer of his Naval Academy graduation, so Wendi was able to attend Phoenix and Katie's wedding. Since then, there have been many occasions that she has not been able to attend.

Her daughter, Winters, graduated from Purdue University in December of 2019 without her mother there. Winters was married in May of 2019 to a wonderful man named Kenneth Larca. They were married at a beachside hotel in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Since then, Winters has had a child, Orion, who will never know his grandmother directly, but he will certainly know her through stories and recollections. He will know who she was and what she meant to the family. Her daughter, Montana, was married at the height of the pandemic in March of 2020. It was a small wedding. The party was so small. It was Montana.

Her husband, Zach, the minister, her sister, Summerlee, and Summerlee's boyfriend, Nick, were the entire folks in attendance at the wedding. But Nick carried around an iPad and shot the wedding so that we were able to Zoom the wedding, and people all over the world were able to be a part of the wedding remotely. So it was quite moving.

Karolyn: I'm assuming that you still stay in contact with her family.

Oh, yes. Yes, very closely.

Karolyn: How did you deal with this tragedy?

I went almost catatonic. I was really in shock. When Wendi died, I was living in Hawaii, of all places. So it took me two days to get back to Annapolis to be with the kids. I was just really gobsmacked. I didn't get to anger or grief or any of that. I was just sort of numb for several weeks. And then the tears started.

Difficult for all of us, for the kids and for me. On the 28th of June, to recollect that anniversary, it's still painful to hear of any mass shooting, which we hear about far too often. So the pain is almost constant.

But any reference to a mass shooting brings up painful memories of that day. If she were here today, what would you say to her about how she changed the lives of so many by trying to do the right thing to protect others from harm? I would say that her contribution was typical of the way she lived her life. Always in service to others. Always interested in others. Always wanting to do more for others.

I would tell her how grateful the surviving families are, as well as the surviving individuals, their wives, husbands, partners, children, all grateful to Wendi for her courage in slowing down that horrible attack.

Karolyn: My goodness, she saved lives in the process. She got her wings, shall we say. Well, if anyone wants to contact you for more information, how do they do that? And how can they support her interest?

Reach out to me directly at pauldonnellyplays.com. As I've said before, supporting the organizations that we partner with directly, the Red Cross and DC Theatre Arts, would be most appreciated. I think there will be people that are listening that would be willing to want to do something. And I think this is a positive thing that people can do to make the world a better place, to support these foundations that make a difference, just like she did. Wendi was, she will be remembered forever.

Karolyn: I think that's really wonderful. I appreciate your being with me today. And you emotionally have suffered through this from a distance, but still it's close to your heart. Are you still in Hawaii?

No, I live in Tallahassee, Florida now.

Karolyn: Oh, okay. And I've just wondered, has this been a huge part of your life after this happened?

Oh, absolutely. Every year on the anniversary, I try to give blood. If I don't make it on the anniversary, I make it on Wendi's birthday, which is May 25th.

I give blood throughout the year in her honor, always posting on Facebook, the picture of me in the Lead Donation Center with the hashtag for Wendi. There are certainly many glorious memories of time spent with her and time spent with the kids. And I'm very grateful to still have the kids in my life today.

Karolyn: She's an angel now, and I think she might be watching over you as well as her kids.

I hope so.

Karolyn: Well, thank you so much for joining us today. And telling us Wendi's story. We really appreciate your being with us and sharing with us an angel on earth. That's a good thing.

I appreciate any opportunity to celebrate Wendi. Thank you.

Seth: Wendi Winters met unthinkable violence with unshakable love for her colleagues. And she left this world exactly how she lived in it, showing up, standing tall, and making things better for others. Paul, thank you for joining us and for sharing her story. This has been Zuzu, all grown up.