

**Chris Velardi, Host:** Welcome to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast from Syracuse University – I'm Chris Velardi.

Today... we've got a powerful, emotional conversation with 2012 Newhouse grad Erika Mahoney. Erika is the host of her own, very personal new podcast—Senseless—where she shares the story of her journey through trauma, grief and resilience after her father was killed in a mass shooting at a Colorado grocery store in 2021.

**Erika Mahoney:** The day my dad died, part of me died too including my identity.

**Chris:** As a daughter, Erika wanted to share her father's story, her family's story, her story. She wanted to take a closer look at the pain she and her community were experiencing, the questions they were asking and the connections that were helping them heal.

As a journalist, she felt conflicted and... well... I'll let her pick it up from there.

**Erika:** I found myself on the other side of the story. My email inbox was filling up with all of these interview requests, and it was tough because I was honestly torn on whether I should speak out or not.

But here I was, a journalist. I was news director of the NPR station in Monterey, California at the time, and I had spent a decade asking people to share their hard stories with me. And so I said, yes to doing interviews, and I wanted to because I wanted to show the world that my dad was a human being who shouldn't have had to run for his life in a grocery store parking lot.

And in talking, it felt very purposeful. And now, four years later, after a lot of work on myself and, you know, moving through grief and trauma and trying to find joy again, I'm raising my voice even more through this podcast, and it feels really, really good.

**Chris:** You mentioned in the email you sent that, that you're proud and you should be proud, obviously, because this is such an important thing for you personally, but an important thing on, on a bigger level, obviously.

**Erika:** Yeah, right.

**Chris:** This is a thing that every time it happens we say how can it happen here? How can it happen again? Yet it keeps happening.

**Erika:** Yeah, yeah. I was really, it made me smile when I wrote the email and I said, you know, I'm really proud of this project. And you wrote back and you, you know, pointing out the word proud.

I've never used that word before. I'm very much, like, typically a wallflower, but I really do feel proud of my podcast, Senses and more than that, too. Just proud of myself for getting back up after this and, trying to cry. You've already. You're making me cry. But, yeah, it's really the first time I've used the word proud.

And I think that we should be able to use the word proud. When we've done something that, you know, it feels aligned with our soul.

**Chris:** There have been, I'm certain, through this process and will continue to be long after this process is over, so many emotions that that you've experienced and, and to retell this story.

**Erika:** Yeah.

**Chris:** What has that been like for you and how have you been able to manage that?

**Erika:**

It's been hard. There were definitely some low points where I wanted to give up and just say, like this is too much and, you know, and to quit. But really, what gave me the strength, were all the people that I interviewed on this show I'll never forget. My very first interview was with a young woman named Olivia McKenzie.

And she lost her mom in the shooting. And I met her on a hillside overlooking Boulder. And the conversation we had, I think we talked for like, two hours. So there was a lot of editing in that, as you know. But it lit this fire in me because her story of grief was so amazing to me and how she was able to put the pieces of her life back together and get back up.

And I just felt like, the world needs these stories. I want to share these stories. My whole career has prepared me to do this. And so, and so I continued on when one foot in front of the other. I mean, making a podcast is not easy in of itself, but this, this subject matter is really tough.

And and it was emotional to like, you know, I lived this from my perspective of loss and losing someone to gun violence. But I also interviewed like shoppers who survived. And so that was really humbling and eye opening to hear their story.

**Chris:** I mean, the theme of of one of the episodes I listened to while mowing the lawn is connections—we're all connected.

**Erika:** Yes, yes.

**Chris:** And that right in that really in, in different places, in different ways. But discovering some of those connections must have been really interesting. I, I don't know if that's the right word.

**Erika:** It is, it's really fascinating. I think that. My editor came up with this phrase. It's called "web of pain." And we use that in the in the podcast because it's so true.

I mean, it's so interesting to see all of these connections not only within the tragedy in Boulder, but beyond. So, for example, the Aurora movie theater, mass shooting, one of the, young woman who is she was killed, Jessica Galli. She was one of my mom's students. And I think this the thing about mass shootings is that they cause an outsized impact.

So it's, you know, you think about my dad and all the other shoppers were there. You think about all the employees who were there. You think about all of the first responders who showed up. I call them helpers. You know, the therapists and everyone that comes in to help. And then you multiply that by all of these incidents happening in the US, and there's just some really I mean, honestly, I was at this event yesterday, and it was at a high school where I was learning about, some new technology called Campus Guardian Angel.

That's, looking to to add a like layer of safety to schools. In the face of this. And the security guard comes up to me and he goes, I was at King Soopers, the grocery store where it happened 30 minutes before the shooting unfolded. And at the time I was working for, like a security company where they bring in the money and just to meet him because he has lived with, like he wishes that he had been there because he could have, he stopped something and I gave him a big hug.

And I said, you're here now, and thank you for sharing my story. And I got his number and his email, I mean, is. So yes, we are all connected. It's I, I see it every day.

**Chris:** As you've gone through this process, as you've talked to people, are there any things that have come out of the conversations you've had, the stories you've been able to share and had shared with you that have surprised you? Is there anything that's kind of that that maybe was was unexpected in a way, kind of even beyond.

**Erika:** Yes. Right now I'm thinking about episode three, which just came out, and the ending is, is about a love story that rose from the ashes of this. So we hear from Logan, and Logan worked at the store and survived.

And not only did he survive, he helped people out the door and get to safety. And, and he eventually crossed paths with Olivia, who I spoke about, my very first interviewee. And, and they fell in love and they helped each other, process their grief and trauma and, I mean,

wow, you know, so often we talk about, you know, the hard parts of grief and it's so hard, but there are also some beautiful things to come out of it.

And I think I would give it all back to have my dad back. But, you know, for me, I've learned to, like I said, slow down. Live, live boldly, raise my voice. I think life is so much shorter than we really think it is. And life is fragile. Every day is really a gift. So I've taken that to heart just in how I lead my life.

**Chris:** And, you know, you talk about kind of the the parts of life and life being shorter and you've got a child, you were you were pregnant when this happened.

**Erika:** Yeah.

**Chris:** Right. In that kind of that, that must have been, just it a huge part of, of the struggle of it, of, of the loss, but also the impending birth.

**Erika:** Totally. I was six months pregnant, with my baby girl. And so she's about the same age as the shooting, which is a little bit tough. And there's just coming out in episode four, but I actually checked in to the hospital to deliver her, on Father's Day, the first Father's Day after losing my dad. And I really wanted her to come on Father's Day because I felt like it would just mask the pain that this holiday would forever hold.

And she came the next day, which happened to be the summer solstice. And now that I'm in a better place, I really like that she has her own day and that I can honor my dad and honor her. So it was really hard. I think it was really hard to become a parent while losing a parent. I remember sobbing so much in the in the hospital room and thinking, how am I going to protect her in a world that didn't protect my dad?

And so I think to answer, you know, going back to one of the first questions you had that's been a driving force of this is how can I open eyes to the pain that this American tragedy causes in hopes of some sort of change and trying to protect my family and my kids, but also just, you know, these younger generations who are really being traumatized by this.

**Chris:** As you listen to the podcast, your journalism training and journalism skills are on full display. You're a storyteller. You are, you are basing everything you're talking about in the facts, in the narrative of what happened. You're adding, you know, the, the stories and the human part of it all. But yet this is also something that very much happened to you. How as you approach this, do you balance those two things?

**Erika:** Oh, it's been a journey.

And I really like this question because the day my dad died, part of me died too, including, you know, my identity and for me, it was tough because rightly so. You know, journalists

have perimeters around what we can and can't say. And, and, you know, we're not supposed to go to protests or wear, you know, t shirts with, like, a cause on it, because that matters.

And we need to remain objective. But for me, it was like, wow, like this happened to me. And it would be disingenuous to pretend that it didn't happen to me. And I never expected to be telling my own story. But here we are. And so I think what's been kind of just what the universe has handed me is stepping into the podcasting sphere has allowed me to more freely express my opinions.

Be my authentic self and just be my whole self. So that's been really, really wonderful. And it's definitely a continuation of all the skills, that I learned in journalism. And so I kind of just see this as like a branching off point almost. And I'm not quite sure what the future holds, but all of the skills of journalism, the fact checking, you know, the storytelling, like that's all in there. And at the same time, I'm just being totally vulnerable and raw and, and myself.

**Chris:** Yeah, that the idea of using those skills and applying them in this way. Are there times that some of those lessons you may have learned as a student at Newhouse are in your head saying, oh, all right, I'm, I've, I've got to do this. I've got to take this approach to to this. And does it, does it help shape, kind of, your style?

**Erika:** Newhouse has been fundamental in my career as a TV reporter and then as a radio reporter, and now as a podcaster. I just have professors' comments still in the back of my head. All, you know, there's they're still there.

Those one liners that will stay with you like, never end an interview without asking. Is there anything else you want to add? Because that is actually a question that will give you surprises. And the technical aspects as well, things that I learned just to edit and, yeah, absolutely, absolutely set me up for this, for this project.

**Chris:** And diving into this podcasting space, which obviously is, is huge, right? There are a lot of voices out there in the podcasting world, but what it offers you as a reporter who had to do stories in a pretty limited amount of time?

**Erika:** Yeah.

**Chris:** Are you enjoying that aspect of storytelling, of being able to dive deeper?

**Erika:** It was like an adjustment because, you know. Yeah. And I was like a daily news reporter for so long. So you have like a day to do a story

**Chris:** A day to do a story in a minute-twenty do it, right?

**Erika:** Exactly. So there's a fast-paced nature and that's really fun and exciting. And I think for me, I had to learn to be more patient in the podcasting sphere. Things just, you know, it's just a slower beat to, to this.

And, and that's been wonderful. But when you look at a 30-minute story, which is how long each episode of my podcast, you know, 30 ish, you can just go so deep with the subject and really dive in. And that's been so amazing. I mean, right before I started the podcast, I was, you know, reporting for NPR and like you would maybe it's even longer than TV.

You'd get four minutes. But going from a four-minute story to a 30 minutes, or even just looking at the script on my computer, I'm like, oh my gosh, I think I'm getting lost in the script. And I did end up hiring some people to I did those like longer mean episodes only because, like, it's about it's, you know, just to have that help and, you know, forming a team has been has been really great.

And there's a lot of things I'm doing. And so to have an editor like a, like a technical editor has been really helpful.

**Chris:** Well, because you are so close to this story, I was wondering if there were other people who you're who you're leaning on to just kind of check you once in a while.

**Erika:** So. So this was like a sign from the universe. But you know, how this all started. Was me going to Best Buy, buying my own record here. And I was just thinking about that day not too long ago, meeting Olivia and then continuing and just getting all of this audio. And then out of the blue, my former, news director at the NPR station in Monterey, where I worked, she, she was the one who hired me.

She says, you know, I have a little bit of time. Can I help you with your project? And I was like, please. And so Krista Almanzan is my editor. And I think that editing is so important and it's so important to have an outside voice. And she's worked, you know, with me throughout this journey. But she's able to have that space and that separation that you need where it's like, you know, you just everyone needs an editor.

So I, so I so in this process, I found my own team, Erika Mahoney, LLC. I trademarked the name. I hired an editor, I got a composer. There's all these, like, little moving parts, and, And actually, I think I want to maybe hold some workshops on how to do a podcast and start a podcast, because I felt like I was really diving into something that I didn't know.

Even the lingo is different between like, you know, the radio TV world, like one of the first things I learned was chat cast is what you call like a two way. Right? So I've always known that as a two way. And, and my podcast isn't a chat cast. It's a narrative. But, but yeah, there was a there was a learning curve.

And I feel like I would love to share what I've learned with people. So yeah.

**Chris:** Yeah. No, I think there is value in understanding it. And, you know, good for you for kind of diving in and figuring it out as you, as you went along.

**Erika:** It was that, it was that.

**Chris:** Sometimes you have to do that as well. You have to, you know, I think to take that leap.

**Erika:** Yeah. It's a leap. You got to take a risk. And you know what happened to my dad and to my family was such a life changing thing that I wanted to take this leap. And it's been so wonderful, so I'm glad I did.

**Chris:** As listeners follow you on this, this journey through this podcast, what are you hoping they take away from the stories you're sharing?

**Erika:** Multiple takeaways. So with this story, I'm really asking people to walk with me from the day of the shooting through the trial and the years in between. When I'm grappling with grief and trauma. And these are things that, you know, the human stories behind the headlines. And so what I hope people take away is that, you know, this American tragedy causes immense pain.

And just opening eyes to the toll that they take. Actually, in 2023, I wrote an essay for The Atlantic talking about that, talking about how so often we focus on the number of victims in a mass shooting. But really this impacts so much, you know, far farther beyond that. So that's my first takeaway. My second takeaway is the main takeaway, and that is moving forward after the unthinkable, which is like the tagline of my show, you know, we live in a really scary, chaotic world.

There's a lot of uncertainty, and I hope that this podcast is a safe place for people to come and and know that we can get on the other side of these hard, hard things. That we can find joy again. And that one way of healing and processing and moving forward is showing up for each other. And I've learned now.

So, you know, so many people showed up for me, and now I'm returning the favor. And I hope that that's a takeaway. You know, in episode one, I talk about this woman who walked out of the store with my dad and made him laugh in his final moments. So now I'm the person in the grocery store smiling. Probably like a crazy person, but, like, just because you never know how much a smile can really mean. And there's little things that we can do in

our daily lives to make us feel, in a world that feels very out of control, more in control. We have a lot more agency than we think.

**Chris:** And those are moments when you know you're making the difference if you smile at someone in the grocery store, and with a podcast like this, you may be making that difference on people that you may never get a chance to meet. That that's a powerful thing.

**Erika:** You know, I'm so glad you said that. I had this vision the other day. I was just kind of pondering, and I was imagining someone with headphones on listening to my podcast, and it just, like, warms my heart because, I've gotten a lot of people writing me saying like, this is helping me so much.

People who maybe lost someone to cancer. I mean, you don't have to be affected by a mass shooting for this to resonate with you and to just know that there's people out in the world listening to this, and it's resonating with them and helping them is, what I did it in the first place and makes every second of hard work so worth it.

**Chris:** I told this was a powerful conversation. You can find Erika's podcast senseless from Lemonada Media on Apple, Spotify, Amazon and all the usual places.

Our thanks to Erika Mahoney for joining us... and to you for listening to this 'Cuse Conversation.

I'm Chris Velardi.

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