

- 1 GVP40, Khary Penebaker
- 2 D: Please state your name.
- 3 K: My name is Khary Penebaker.
- 4 D: And how old are you?
- 5 K: I am almost forty-two years old. Yeah, right? (laughter) Yeah.
- 6 D: I would've never guessed that.
- 7 K: I know! I'll be forty-two in October. (pause) I look young. (laughter)
- 8 D: I'm speechless. (laughter)
- 9 K: Yeah.
- 10 D: You are blessed.
- 11 K: Thank you.
- 12 D: You're welcome. I didn't see that one coming.
- 13 K: Right?
- 14 D: And I know you've experienced gun violence; would you please share your story?
- 15 K: So, on September 8th, 1979, my mom, Joyce wrote a note. She got in her car and drove on the
- 16 freeway and then pulled over and she sat there with nothing but depression, lying to her, making
- 17 her believe that my world w-would be better off without her. She, she shot and killed herself
- 18 when she was only twenty-seven years old. And I was only twenty months old. So, I know you
- 19 better than I know my own mom and that is, is heartbreaking but at the same time, I know how
- 20 bad her darkness was. And I know the, the lies and the games that depression does to you, so, it's
- 21 my job now to do everything I possibly can to not only break the cycle of suicide but to tell my
- 22 mom's story because she can't.
- 23 D: When, when did you find out that your mom had committed suicide? How old were you?

24 K: So, first, I don't, I don't ever use the word "commit". I, I say, "She completed suicide."
25 Because the, when you have, when you attempt suicide, the logical conclusion to that, it's not a
26 success or it's not a committed act, it's a completion of that attempt. It's not like I'm, I'm like,
27 the, the you know, the word police here but I just wanna make sure that w-we get the verbiage
28 right because there's a stigma that associated with, with suicide and committing something
29 seems like it's a crime. So, that's why I used the phrase, "completed suicide". But she completed
30 suicide on September 8th, 1979. My parents told me that she died of an illness, which I guess in
31 the, the grander sense she did. Depression is what made her believe that she could no longer live.
32 I didn't find out until roughly I was ten years old and my aunt said something, not directly to me,
33 but in conversation with someone else and I, and I heard it. But I didn't, I didn't conceptualize
34 what suicide meant and then when I was eighteen years old, my, my dad had his office in our
35 house. And like all kids do, I was goin' through his stuff and I found about a hundred copies of
36 my mom's death certificate. And it was probably the worst days of my life, when I found it. The,
37 the sad part, if you can't make that moment any, any worse, was that I-I didn't actually read all
38 of the death certificate. I saw the part where it said, "Self-inflicted gunshot wound of the head,"
39 but I didn't look at her birthday. And it wasn't until Erica Lafferty whose mom, Dawn, was shot
40 and killed in the Sandy Hook mass shooting convinced me that I needed to find out when her
41 birthday was. So, I bought her death certificate online when I was roughly thirty-nine, I believe.
42 And that's how I found out my mother's birthday, was buying her death certificate online.

43 D: Oh wow. When you found out that she completed suicide, were you angry?

44 K: I was very angry. A-And besides, not just finding out when I was eighteen, I was always
45 angry in general as a, as a young kid. I was a terrible son, like, I was, I was very mean to my
46 parents, very distant with my sister because to me, love sucked. I mean, my mom wasn't there.

47 And having that, that emptiness that no one else could fill my mom, my, my dad remarried to, to
48 the woman that I actually call my mom, 'cause she raised me. She earned that title. And I know I
49 made it as impossible as I could. I did the whole, "You're not my mom!" thing and all of that.
50 But thank God, that woman refused to allow my dumbness, to not use a swearword on your
51 podcast here but she just, was the mom that I needed. You know? Joyce may have given my life,
52 but Paula taught me how to live. But I didn't see that. Right? I-I couldn't, I-I was just so angry
53 and bitter that I took it out on the people that I, that I cared about. So it, it wasn't until I was an
54 actual adult, if you wanna call me one. So, I was in my twenties when, when my mom and I
55 became friends. And she, she is like a, she's my superhero. And I can, I can ask her anything,
56 she's so smart and just can see through my nonsense, and helped me be a better person. And it's
57 unfortunate the, like the, the stuff I put them through. But besides that kind of nonsense, I was a
58 good student. I earned a scholarship to college for, for track. And I did it all on my own. But
59 there are things that I wish I would've done different, I wish I would've been closer to my sister,
60 for one. 'Cause she is a, she is a great human being, and I just was so mad that she had both her
61 parents and I didn't. But that is, that's not her fault. And I wish I would've been nicer to both of
62 my parents 'cause I, I can only imagine how hard that was for them to have a son like that, that,
63 that just, you know, visibly hated them. And for nothing that they had done. I just was angry. I, I
64 did go to several therapists, one actually called me crazy when I was I think, fifth grade,
65 somethin' like that. And I never let the therapy work. 'Cause there's, there's nothing you can say
66 to me that's going to make this better. There's nothing, there's no amount of time that I could sit
67 on the couch where you're going to soothe this pain. And I just, I didn't know how to process it,
68 I didn't know how to, to talk about it and I think that is the, the crux of, of my anger. I just didn't
69 know how to talk about it. And I didn't allow anybody the opportunity to really help me talk

70 about it either, until I found Moms. And they, I remember sittin' in that, that beautiful
71 Downtown Manhattan office trying to, so there's like forty survivors in that room and Erica went
72 first. And you know, and Erica's story is her mom being shot in Sandy Hook. And I'm listening
73 to all these brave people, just, just tell these gut-wrenching stories, but they were doing it in
74 about ninety-second clips. 'Cause we're just, forty of us were tryna get around the room and I
75 was the only one in that room that was a gun-suicide survivor. And it felt like I didn't belong.
76 And nothing that they had done, it was just the context. I just felt like I was intruding on their
77 space. And so, when it got to me, and again keep in mind they're supposed to be, supposed to be
78 doing this in ninety-second segments, and I couldn't. Like I, I had not shared my story in front of
79 a group like that yet. This is five years ago, now. And I ugly-face cried and I was cho-like, got
80 choked up after every word and it took like ten minutes. And they're all like, very genuine and
81 sincere and trying to comfort me. And I eventually got it out but when, when that, that, that
82 section was done, I was in the, in the hallways still quite emotional. Richard Martinez came up to
83 me and, 'cause he knew I was struggling, and he, you know, he's tryin' to talk to me but I was
84 like, "Dude, I don't, I shouldn't be here." You know, "I'm, I'm infringing on your space here.
85 Someone shot Christopher, but my mom shot herself." And he, he grabbed me like forcefully by
86 the arm and he said, "Don't ever do that again because your pain is your own. There is not gun
87 violence survivor hierarchy here." But he also made sure that I knew that I'm still here. I'm, I'm
88 still, I got air in my lungs and I got, I got a story to tell and it is, it, like a moral obligation now to
89 go make sure that no one else feels like I do. So, that man literally introduced me to my voice
90 and the way that Shannon made me feel like I have a part to play in this and Lucy told me that
91 you know, "Khary, your," you know, "You lost your mom and I lost my son, but now we have
92 each other." Right? And then you watch like, Erica. The way that she, the woman has zero fear

93 and it, it just, like, watching her before I could do all this, it was like watching your, your biggest
94 hero. Like, you watch Martin Luther King give a speech and you see Erica, like, she just made
95 me wa-, I want to be like that despite the context. I don't wanna be a gun violence survivor, but I
96 wanna own this. And she taught me how to do that. So it wasn't 'til that meeting. And as, as
97 brutal as it was for me to go through it, I realized that I got a voice, I have a story. And I'm going
98 to share this with anybody that's willing to listen to me because I know that every twenty-five
99 minutes, someone completes suicide just like my mom did. And I feel that maybe I can help, I-I
100 know I can't save every person, I definitely can't go back and save my mom, but I can make a
101 difference in someone's life and help to spare another family from living my never-ending
102 nightmare.

103 D: What would you say to a young man or woman who just discovered that their parent or their
104 parents committed suicide?

105 K: That you're going to experience something extremely brutal and unfair, but it's not your fault.
106 And that you are still here. And while what has happened to you and your family is, is
107 unbelievably unfair, you are still here. And I would encourage them if, if possible, to own it.
108 And, and live in that pain to understand it. And remind them of what it's like to lift weights, that
109 first time you do it, it's gonna be painful and it's not fun, but the more you do it, the stronger you
110 get, the easier it's going to become 'cause pain is never going to go away. Ever, it never well. I
111 mean it's been forty years since my mom shot and killed herself and every day is a challenge, I
112 gotta survive myself every single day. I don't have to just survive, I gotta survive me. That's a
113 tough thing to reconcile with, but I do. And let them know that they're not alone in this, that it's,
114 it's going, you're gonna have days where you don't wanna get out of bed. You're gonna have
115 days where you're not sure how you're gonna face the next five minutes. But you have to

116 because y-, especially if they have kids, y-you have to show them that you can get through this,
117 you're not gonna get over it, but you'll get through it. And you'll learn coping mechanisms so
118 that when you have special days like Mothers' Days or birthdays or the, the day that your loved
119 one died, that it's gonna be tough but you can be the example of how you can live through a
120 tragedy and continue on to make the world a better place.

121 D: Have you, do you do something special with your children on your mothers' birthday or
122 Mother's Day?

123 K: No. I, it's— (pause)

124 D: I just said that 'cause you said a coping mechanism idea.

125 K: No, I don't talk about my mom with my kids.

126 D: Okay.

127 K: Because I want them to remain as innocent as they can.

128 D: Okay.

129 K: And also because this pain is mine.

130 D: Right.

131 K: And I get to decide when I'm going to share it, I, I just don't, there's, there's so many levels
132 of complexity to it, that I don't, I don't want them to know this yet. My oldest daughter's twenty,
133 so, she obviously knows but, I, I want the grandmother that they do have that they see, that
134 babysits and comes over, I want them to just live in that. Right? I don't want them to know this
135 yet. And for me, I don't, like, on Mother's Day it is torture. I mean, you see all of these
136 Facebook posts about what, what these kids do with their moms and all this stuff and I don't
137 have that. We go to church and the pastor will be talking about Mother's Day and loving mothers
138 and what moms do for us and it's torture. So I treat those days as, as, like I gotta struggle through

139 it. Those days suck for me. Mother's Days, her birthday, Christmas, my birthday, they suck
140 'cause I don't, who would wanna live like this? Right? There, there's no, there's no comfort in
141 hearing someone say, "Your mom, I'm sure your mom loved you." Or how proud she would be
142 of me, like, I don't wanna hear your platitudes, I wanna hear my mom say it. I mean, I'm almost
143 forty-two years old and I have no idea what it's like to hear my own mom say, "I love you." So,
144 while I, I'm trying to get to a place where I can appreciate what I have versus what I don't have
145 and I, I have to actively choose to celebrate my, my mom, Paula. But even that is difficult. I
146 mean, I, I, as many speeches as I've given or interviews I've done and all that, the, the public
147 side is one thing, but the private side is, I haven't mastered that yet, workin' on it.

148 D: Do you forgive your mom?

149 K: So, when, when Erica convinced me to buy that death certificate for her birthday that year, I
150 decided this in 2015. I decided that I was going to, for her birthday, to forgive her. Now,
151 forgiveness is something that should be a two-way street. Y-you give the forgiveness and the
152 person receives it, but she's not here. So, I, I honestly believe it was more for me than it was for
153 her. But I, you know, in my heart of hearts, I believe that hopefully they've got Facebook in
154 heaven, and she can see the post that I made 'cause I'm, I'm sure, you know, her looking down
155 on me. And I believe that she is. It's gotta be hard knowing that for the majority of my life, that I
156 hated her for what she did to me. But at the same time, had, (pause) had I not, I wouldn't be the
157 person that I am now. 'Cause I, I, I grew from it. I mean, that hate and all of that helped me to, to
158 see how bad it is. I-it's like th-those clichés, like, y-you can't appreciate the good without the
159 bad. Like, it's the thorns on the rose that make the rose better, right? So, I understand what hate
160 means to me. So, now because I've experienced that, I-I need to experience the love side of life.
161 And I don't, I don't wanna have an ounce of hate in me. And it's because of, of how, how much

162 of a grip it can have on you and how it can pollute your thought processes and how it can just
163 tear apart your relationships and prevent you from enjoying the beauty of love, so I had to make
164 the conscious choice to, to simply utter the words that, “I forgive you.” Now I mean, I-I not
165 exactly sure what all of that means, but I’m not mad at her anymore, I don’t blame myself. For
166 the longest I, when I give these speeches in the past, you would hear me say, “What was wrong
167 with me? How, how could you do this to me?” Or, “What did I do wrong? How could you not
168 love me enough to fight for me?” Things like that, but it, it took understanding what that meant
169 for me to grow from it and understand that I didn’t, I didn’t do anything. I didn’t ask to be born.
170 In fact, a lot of speeches I give, I will start saying, started out by saying, “I didn’t ask to be here.
171 I didn’t ask to be born to a mother who was severely mentally unwell.” I didn’t ask for that. I
172 surely did-didn’t ask for the consequence of her actions either. But since I have to live it, I can
173 choose to let it control me, or I can control it. And that’s what forgiveness to me meant. Now, I,
174 I, I could be wrong, I don’t know, but that’s what works for me.

175 D: Mhmm. What would you say to lawmakers, what do you think they could do that could’ve
176 changed the outcome for your mom?

177 K: So, in 1979 they didn’t have the kind of mental healthcare system that we have now. And
178 even the one, the system we have now is woefully inadequate. What I would say to them is,
179 “You need to engage with your own humanity and look at, instead of just saying you know,
180 ‘There’s, there’s a hundred people that die every day from gun violence,’ and just looking at the
181 black and white of that number, look at the faces of gun violence. And appreciate the devastation
182 that comes with it for those for us who have to live on after our loved ones are shot and killed,
183 whether they shoot and kill themselves or were shot and killed by somebody else. Y-Y-You have
184 to look at the people and the pain, the real pain.” As, as compared to like, existing solely in

185 talking points or trying to find a way to dismiss or belittle those of us who have this, this burden
186 to carry. And there-there's some who are able to do that, but then there's some that can't. But it's
187 my job to talk to them still and introduce them to my pain and, and let them feel it and see it. I
188 mean, I've cried everywhere imaginable, it doesn't bother me one bit. I'm not embarrassed. I'm
189 not "too manly" to cry. But I want them to see how bad this feels, I would describe that story
190 even more vivid detail than I have here, because they should know that there was a real person at
191 the end of that barrel. Right? There, she, she could have done something with her life that was
192 more than what she had done in, in the twenty-seven years she was allowed on Earth. She was a
193 special needs teacher. Her students loved her. I mean, her students knew her better than I did.
194 And I want those elected officials to know that. That they have the opportunity to save peoples'
195 lives. Not just those that are shot and killed, but those of us who survived this. Who knows what
196 I could've been if I didn't have this burden to carry. Wh-I could've done some amazing things
197 and that's not to say that I'm not trying now, but I mean, this is often times debilitating for me. I-
198 it's a barrier in some cases that prevents me from being the person that I, that I want to be. And
199 those elected officials need to understand their role in helping to end gun violence. Some choose
200 to listen. Some choose to be influenced by the gun death lobby. But that's on them. They're
201 gonna have to answer for that one day. But I'm hoping that our stories and our courageous effort
202 to make a difference will, will be enough inspiration for them to reengage with their humanity to
203 the point where they say, "You know what? I don't care what letter's behind my name, I know
204 that the bullet doesn't care. And I don't want anybody else to feel like Khary and Debra do."
205 D: Amen. Anything you'd like to add?
206 K: Well, one thing that I would say is that there are a lot of people who will engage in self-care.
207 Whether, you know, y-you journal or you take walks or you're into art or photography or

208 whatever it is that they do to make themselves feel better, I would encourage them to do that. But
209 for those of us who can't do that yet, and I'm one of 'em. I-I don't the self-care stuff, I have not,
210 I admittedly don't take good enough care of myself in that regard because this is my therapy.
211 When I'm on that stage and a microphone is in my, in my hand, it feels like that's exactly where
212 God wanted me to be. And that I know that I'm reaching at least one person in that audience or
213 someone that might be hearing on the radio and they will consider putting their gun down or
214 putting that razor down or stepping off that ledge, untying that knot, putting the cap back on the
215 bottle. They, they can see that while this dark moment is, y-you might not see your way out of it.
216 You can't, at least in that moment, you don't see that there's a, another day coming, that the
217 darkness is so overwhelming, but it, it does go away. At least that darkness does. I mean, I have
218 to remind myself, I mean when those dark moments hit me, that this too shall pass. And I say it
219 over and over and over again, just to remind myself this is temporary. But when I'm on that
220 stage, it feels like I'm alive and I'm safe despite the harassment that I get, I feel completely safe.
221 And it's, it's my opportunity to share my pain with the world and introduce them to my mom
222 'cause I don't get to meet her. So, I'm gonna make sure I tell everybody I can about her. So,
223 whatever self-care people can do, whether it's speaking or private stuff, do it as often as you can.
224 And do whatever you can to make sure that we break every cycle, whether it's self-harm or
225 violence in the streets or irresponsibility with firearms. It's, it's, we either can choose to stop this
226 or be complicit in it. And I refuse to just simply live the rest of the days that I'm allowed on
227 Earth by watching more and more people die without saying something 'cause I know there's
228 gonna be another son or daughter that's, that's gonna find a death certificate and wonder, "How
229 could this happen to me?" And I refuse to remain silent.
230 D: Thank you, that was good.