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Azim Khamisa: But the seminal moment was in that time we spent, we locked eyeballs. I'm looking in his eyes and he's looking in my eyes, and we held that glance for what seemed like an uncomfortable time. And, I'm looking in his eyes to try and find a murderer, and I didn't. I was able to climb through his eyes, and touch his humanity, that I got the spark in him was no different in me or you or anybody else who is listening to this podcast.

Sam Fuqua: That's Azim Khamisa, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Azim Khamisa about forgiveness and about his work to create safer schools and communities through restorative principles. He is a speaker, author, and consultant. He founded the Tariq Khamisa Foundation after his son was killed in an incident of gang violence.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're very pleased to have with us for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! Azim Khamisa. Hello.

Azim Khamisa: Thanks for having me.

Sam Fuqua: To begin, can you tell us about your son, Tariq? About how he died and how that led you to the work that you've been doing now for some 30 years?

Azim Khamisa: Yes, absolutely. Uh, we're 30 years into the tragedy that happened in '95. I was, uh, born in Kenya and then ed, educated in England and moved to the United States 52 years ago to escape the violence of Idi Amin, thinking that my children would be safer in the United States. And, uh, my son Tariq was born in the United States. Uh, uh, my wife was actually pregnant when we immigrated. And, uh, he was a kind, gentle, generous, great sense of humor, and was a gifted writer and, uh, accomplished, uh, photographer, aspired someday to work for National Geographic. He was a sophomore student at San Diego State University, and worked weekends as a pizza delivery man, and was lured to a bogus address by a youth gang. And, in a gang initiation, a 14-year-old shot and killed him. Uh, he died, uh, at the young age of 20. So, needless to say, um, losing a child probably is one of the worst nightmare a parent can go through, and I went through all the emotions you would imagine a parent would go through. The pain is almost indescribable. It's pretty devastating. It's, uh, something that never goes away even 30 years later. There's never a day when I don't think of Tariq several times during the day.

I remember that at one point I was suicidal. I did not really know how to move forward without my son. Fortunately, I do have a daughter. And, uh, he wasn't my only child. I've met many parents that had lost an only child, which I think would've been much harder. I practice as a Sufi Muslim. Sufis are the metaphysical interpretation of Islam. So, we tend to be different than the fundamental aspects of Islam. And in the Sufi tradition, uh, I grew up, uh, with meditation and

with, um, values of, uh, compassion and empathy and forgiveness. My mom was very spiritual. My dad was a businessman, and I grew up, uh, with equal emphasis on my career as, and my spiritual foundation. And I think that helped me because in my darkest night of the soul, my degrees in math and finance, although I went to some pretty good schools in England, were pretty useless. And I think what saved me, was that spiritual foundation.

I started to meditate at the age of 20, and I lost my son in my early forties. So, what I downloaded in my meditation after Tariq passed away is that there were victims at both ends of the gun. The killer was a 14-year-old. And, uh, I never went into that mode of revenge and retribution and anger at the 14-year-old because I was given the wisdom. It didn't come from my intellect or my loving heart. I don't think us mortals are capable of that. It was a download from a higher power that there are victims at both ends of the gun. And I work in international finance, I speak half a dozen languages. I traveled the world. I had no clue there were such things as youth gangs. Uh, routinely flew in from London to, and changed suitcases, and flew to Tokyo. But after Tariq passed away, I remember it took literally all of my willpower just to climb out of bed. What really helped me was the support of my spiritual community. Uh, my mother was alive at that time, so that was a big support. And, uh, I started to look into this issue about youth violence, and it surprised me that we lose a young soul in the United States every waking hour of every single day.

And when you look back, we had over 500 school shootings and, and, uh, Sandy Hook, I'm sure it was in international news, was 20 first graders, six, seven years old, were killed in automatic gunfire. I'm thinking, my God, they had a lot to live, you know, they were so young and innocent and, and how did we create a society where kids kill kids? I mean, we are the richest nation in the world. It's not about money. We can do anything we really want, and we often do. And, we can spend billions and trillions on wars on foreign soil when every single day, uh, with defenseless children are being wiped out in a frenzy of bizarre violence. That didn't sit right with me because I felt that, sure, it's easy to see that Tariq was a victim of Tony. Tony was the 14-year-old. But Tony was a victim of society, of American society because violence to this extent does not happen in other first world countries. So, you know, that begs the question, well, who is society? Well, it's you and me and everybody who's listening to this podcast because societies do not happenstance. I believe every one of us who is an American is responsible for the society we've created.

I am a first generation American citizen. I love my country. I know most, everybody who's an American does. There's a lot of good here. When it comes to violence, we are a very bad role model. And that's not a good thing because being the richest nation in the world, we have a tremendous impact on the global culture of our planet. Because what happens in America eventually seeps into all the other parts of the world. If you travel overseas, what do you see, you know? McDonald's and KFC and Starbucks and American movies and American, um, music and Levi's and SUVs and you know. And unfortunately, we're also now exporting the good, which is, which is a good thing, but also we're exporting our violence, and I think that that is something that we must take responsibility for. So, I felt as an American citizen that I must take my share of the responsibility for the bullet that took my son's life. Why? Because it was fired by an American child.

We could take the position that he killed my one and only son, so he should be hung from the highest pole. But how does that create a better society? So, I ended up forgiving him, and nine months later, I founded the Tariq Khamisa Foundation to honor my son. Um, but also to address the issue of youth violence in our culture. It started with a simple premise that violence is a learned behavior. If you accept that as an axiom, then nonviolence can also be a learned behavior. But you have to teach it because it shocked me by the time our children get to grade one, six years old, they've seen over a hundred thousand images of violence. Media, you know, if it bleeds, it leads. It's, most all of the news is about violence, video games, movies, even on our streets, you know, we see so much violence. So, I, I started the Tariq Khamisa Foundation with the mandate of stopping kids from killing kids by breaking the cycle of youth violence and essentially had three mandates.

First, was to save lives of children. Important to do. We lose so many young souls. Second, was to empower them with the right choices so they don't fall through the crack and get involved with gangs and crimes and drugs and alcohol and weapons. And the third mandate was to teach the principles of non-violence, of accountability, which I think is important, of empathy, of compassion, of forgiveness, and of peace building because you're not gonna wake up one day and find out that the world is at peace. We have to proactively work at it. Soon after I started the foundation, I reached out to the grandfather and guardian of my son's killer. And, with the attitude I'm not here screaming retribution and revenge and anger because your grandson took the life of my son, father, I'm here in the spirit of compassion and forgiveness because what I really see here is we both lost a son. Tony lived with his grandfather and calls him daddy. And, uh, I've started this foundation with a lofty mission of stopping kids from killing kids. And, the real reason I have reached out to you is to ask for your help. This is a big job. I can't bring Tariq back. He's gone and he is gone forever. There's nothing you can do to get Tony out of prison. Tony was the first 14-year-old to be tried as an adult in the state of California. But the one thing you and I can do is to make sure other young souls in our community don't end up dead like Tariq or end up in prison like Tony for a very long time. That we can do. Will you help me?

So, plus he is also a very spiritual man. He is a Baptist from the South. And, uh, he was very quick to take my hand of forgiveness, and the first thing out of his mouth is, "Thank you for reaching out to me. Ever since I found out my grandson was responsible for the death of your son, I went into the prayer closet, praying that someday I get to meet you so I can extend my condolences to you and your family. And of course, I'll help you." So, the foundation is 30 years old. In fact, on Saturday the 25th of October, we are celebrating a gala for our 30th anniversary. Ples and I are still together 30 years later. We've given, we have several programs. We have four programs for youth. One of them is a live assembly with me and him. And then we have follow up, uh, programs, uh, we focus from fourth to tenth grade because if they make you to tenth grade, they don't usually join a gang that late. We have three levels. We have a, a 10-week curriculum. So we have, first level is fourth, fifth and sixth. The second is seventh and eighth. The third one is ninth and tenth. We create a peace club on campus. And, we have a mentoring program for the kids that are on that slippery slope.

And then, we were invited by UC Berkeley to create a, a program for parents based on restorative justice, based on the work we've done with the kids. And so, we now have a program for parents. And during the pandemic, we created a program for teachers because they are probably as

traumatized as the kids are. So, the six programs essentially make the level of safe school model, and we're successfully keeping kids away from gangs, drugs, alcohol, weapons, and teaching these principles of accountability, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, and peace building. And, I have over 150,000 letters from kids, uh, it tells me that not only are this concept teachable, our kids are hungry for it. We've shifted many trajectory of the kids, that instead of getting involved with gangs, they are now going to university, getting degrees, and being productive, contributing members.

Five years after the tragedy, I knew for me to complete my journey of forgiveness, I had to finally come eyeball to eyeball with Tony. Yes, it took me five years because I think you would acknowledge it's hard to come eyeball to eyeball with the person who took your son's life. And that was a very seminal moment. He was in New Folsom Prison in Sacramento, and um, I asked the grandfather to go with me. It was my first visit, but I told him I have, I need some alone time with Tony because he was the last person to see my son. And Ples was very gracious. We spent the first half an hour together, and then he left me and Tony alone and we talked for a while. I had some tough questions for him. But the seminal moment was in that time we spent, we locked eyeballs. I'm looking in his eyes and he's looking in my eyes, and we have that glance for what seemed like an uncomfortable time. And I'm looking in his eyes to try and find a murderer, and I didn't. I was able to climb through his eyes and touch his humanity. That I got the spark in him was no different in me or you or anybody else who is listening to this podcast.

He was courteous. He was remorseful. He was, uh, articulate. He was well mannered. And, he didn't portray any of the attitudes of a 19-year-old gang member in our society. A likable kid. I wasn't expecting that. At that point, I told him, "You know, I've been working with your grandfather for over four years now, and you know I forgiven you," because the grandfather stayed in touch with Tony and, the entire time he was in prison, "and I want you to know that when you come out of prison, you have a job at the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, and you can come and work for the Tariq Khamisa Foundation with your grandfather and me." I stayed with him for another 20 years advocating for his release, which is complicated to do as I'm sure you can acknowledge. Finally, on 2019, six years ago, he went in front of the parole hearing, and of course I was there advocating for his release along with my daughter, who is the executive director of her brother's foundation. It's a seven-hour parole hearing, you know, mostly with Tony. They grilled him on every altercation, which is very easy to do. You can look at a guard the wrong way and get punished.

Finally, I was allowed to speak and my daughter and, I essentially told him, "You know, he, you need to release him because he has work to do not behind bars. He's not the same person he was when he was 14 and took my son's life. And he can save a lot of kids. We reach tens of thousands of kids every year and, uh, Tony can join us and share his testimony. He can save a lot of kids that might be thinking about going the route he did. He joined a gang at the age of eleven and took, in sixth grade, and took my son's life in eighth grade. He can shift them, so release him. Normally, you don't get released the first time you go into the parole hearing, but the commissioner was in tears. He said, "Mr. Khamisa, I've been doing this work for 25 years. I've never had the victim's father and victim's sister advocate for the offender's release." Anyway, he was released because, uh, I think the commissioner felt that he can do and save a lot of kids. So then, Tony has been volunteering for the foundation since 2019 as his grandfather and I have

done for 30 years. He's now, uh, on staff and we're working in Tariq Khamisa Foundation as of recently. So, he's, uh, handling programs. He's getting trained in restorative justice. I often speak with him. The grandfather is having some medical issues, so mostly the assemblies I do with him, and sometimes my daughter does it with him. And he really captures the attention of the kids, especially the ones that are on that slippery slope.

So, it's a full circle. I'm glad I went the route I went, and chose forgiveness instead of revenge because I've written five books, and my trilogy, my first book was For Murder to Forgiveness, and Forgiveness to Fulfillment was my second book. Because the work that I've done, I've personally given over a thousand presentation to over a million kids. And then, the trilogy was from Fulfillment to Peace, and Tony actually wrote the foreword to that. And, it's a 25-year+ journey, actually, it's, 30-year journey that started very dark with, uh, murder, but ended in peace. I'm at a level of peace that I never have been before. And the portal was forgiveness.

Alexis Miles: That is such a powerful story. And, I'm, I'm sitting here wondering what it took for you to go inside. I imagine you had to go inside and find something that would allow you to forgive. Can you speak more to that?

Azim Khamisa: Yes. Um, you know, I started to meditate at the age of 20. My practice was an hour a day. And, after Tariq died, my, I couldn't sleep or eat or you know, life just came to an end. I was meditating seven, eight, nine hours a day. In my tradition, in the Sufi tradition, you have a 40-day grieving ritual. And that ritual entails that for the 40 days after you lose a loved one, you have to grieve. I had heard from my congregation that brought breakfast, lunch, and dinner, helped to clean the house, but I had to tell the story. And, I couldn't even say Tariq died because when I, you know, it was so early. But they would be very patient. And since Tariq died in such a complicated manner, I had to talk about all the details. And, I could tell I can't tell this story one more time. It's extremely painful, almost unbearably painful. But looking back at it, uh, it's like taking a scab of a wound - painful, but when the scab reform it's a little smaller than the one you took out. So, for 40 days, you know, and then, and then after our first group comes in, we chant, we pray, we meditate. And then there's another group that comes in and had to go through this process for 40 days. And we buried, uh, my son in Vancouver because both my parents were alive at that time. And Vancouver, Canada was my, my main mosque. And my father had a 11-hour surgery, seven bypasses, two days before Tariq died, so there's no way he could have traveled to the funeral. So, we, we took Tariq's body to Vancouver. And, there were 1,400 people that came to Tariq's funeral. And, uh, we didn't tell my father because the surgeon said, we tell him he, this might take his life.

So, Ty died on a Saturday. The funeral was on a Thursday, and then the day before, we decided to tell him because we felt he had to pay his last respects to his grandson. And, he was heavily sedated. My sister did a good job. I, I, I'm still in awe of my mother because from Saturday to Wednesday, she's, visited my father. She knew, but she couldn't tell him. I didn't go see him because he would've seen it in my face because there was no way. So, I think one of the revelations to me is women are much stronger dealing with emotions than men are at, at least I know my mother was. So, my sister broke the news and then they put him under sedation, and the doctor says, "Well, he can go to the funeral for two hours." Of course, it, 1,400 people, you know, the whole ceremony was probably most of the day, and he stayed there. Of course, his

prayers at the funeral, I had to step into the grave to accept his body, and that was one of the hardest things to do because I was, you know, the preem, preeminent feeling was burying me with him. I didn't want to leave him there alone. But this rituals are so strong because when I buried him, there's no denial he died. I remember meeting a father who said, "Azim, how do you do this? I lost my son 25 years ago, and I still can't talk about them."

So, then there's prayers at the funeral, ten days, actually every day up to the 40 days. The 40 days prayer are the most significant because my spiritual advisor told me, "This ends the grieving period. And, according to our tradition, because the reason you grieve for the 40 days because your son's soul is in close proximity with family and loved ones. After 40 days, we believe there's a journey after we die. Your son's soul moves to a different consciousness in preparation of its forward journey. And excessive grieving by loved ones will impede his soul's journey. My recommendation to you is to do good deeds in his name because good deeds done in the name of the departed soul provide high octane fuel in his journey In the next world." I thought that kind of helped me a lot, uh, because when I started the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, we're a nonprofit, his name is on the marquee, we do good deeds in his name every single day, and my goal there was that we create millions of dollars of spiritual currency so he could finish his life in, in a rocket in the next world. And, uh, that helped me because it, kind of, gave me purpose to do the work I do in the foundation and to create spiritual growth. Obviously, you want to do something for your child, you know, and that gave me a, a, a, a purpose to do that. And also, it's helping society. So, it was a win for Tariq. It was a win for me. It was a win for us. Well, we started in San Diego, but of course, we are national now. We, I speak all over the world actually teaching, uh, these principles.

Alexis Miles: Once again, that, that is such a powerful movement from that, kind of, I would say primal grief into becoming involved in not only helping your son move on through his journey in a good way, but also helping the whole world. Azim, you have such a strong spiritual foundation and a process that helped support you through this, along just with your, the, the love and strength of your wife and your daughter. How would you counsel people who don't have a strong spiritual foundation? What would you say to them if they would like to, to walk on the path of freedom instead of the path of revenge?

Azim Khamisa: The people that do not have a spiritual path do also have a soul. I remember I spoke, uh, in one of the SUNY universities in, you know, Southern Universities of New York. Uh, I was invited by, by a professor that teaches nonviolence and, uh, and some of the Gandhian, uh, uh, methods of, uh, of nonviolence, and she pro, promoted my talk to the whole university because when I got there she says, "I don't think I did you a favor. You have like 800 students coming to your lecture tonight, and many of them are physicists and scientists that are atheists. They don't believe in God. And you are one of the most spiritual person I know." You know? I said, "Don't worry about it." Uh, I said, "One of my best friends in England was an atheist. They're not bad people. They're just people." In the early part of my talk, I said, "Okay, uh, I just wanna make sure, to make sure the spirituality and religion are different. Often they are confused. Religion has to have a deity. Spirituality does not have to have a deity. Spirituality is the study of the spirit or the soul. So, let me make sure we are on the same page. Those of you who do not have a soul, stand up." She was going "great" thinking, "where is Khamisa going with this?"

Because there were no takers. I repeated that. I said, "Those of you who do not have a soul, stand up."

And, and I said that what helped me make the call that I did was my spirit. And I still teach that to kids, that if you have an important decision to make, don't just rely on your intellect. Although nothing wrong with getting a master's degree or a PhD, the more education you get, the better you are able to analyze the pros and the cons. But the intellect is a limited facility. Even Einstein says, We must take care not to make intellect our guard. Sure it has powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead. It can only serve. This is Einstein. So, as I said, if you have a big decision, you go to your intellect and you ask the question, does that make sense or does that not make sense? If it does make sense, you go to your heart because that's where emotions reside. And you ask the question, does it feel good, right, or just? Because you all have an idea what is good, right, and just. We don't have to be taught that, we are born with that. Don't stop there 'cause we've all done things we thought, well, that makes a lot of sense and that really feels good, right, and just, and then we say, why did I do that? Especially when you're teenagers. Go to your spirit.

Now that you know we all have a spirit, and you ask the question, is it inspiring? I said, I don't do and move forward on any decision until I get a check in all of those three boxes. When you get a check in your intellect, in your head, in your heart, and in your spirit, that is going to be the best decision because your spirit always makes the decision that is the highest good for you, the other person, and the universe. And then, I had all of these physicists that come to me after I, uh, finished my talk thanking, saying thank you, because a lot of them were confusing that spirituality was tied to religion. Of course, we have a soul, we have a spirit, but I said, it's probably a stronger faculty than intellect and emotion. Use it. I said, it's a gift that you have. And you don't have to believe in God, but at least you know that the spirit is there. It's part of you, much like your head and your heart. That rang well with some of these physicists that were atheists because part of their thinking is that, uh, atheism is about believing that there is a God. No. Spirituality and religion are, are different. So, I think that that is what I would say to somebody that does not have a strong spiritual foundation, that you still have a spirit probably smarter than your intellect and your heart, you know?

Sam Fuqua: Yeah. Staying with the intellect I guess for a moment, um, the foundation has been around for many decades now. You've been doing this ten-session educational series that you spoke of a few minutes ago, but you're also a business person, right? And I'm sure you pay attention to the numbers. And so, how do we know that the work is effective, you know? How do we know that it is, uh, for example, keeping kids from making the wrong choices, such as joining a gang? Or do we know that?

Azim Khamisa: Right? Well, no, we do know that. Uh, we, uh, have several stories. I just spoke at San Diego State University, which was my son's alma mater, and this kid came up to me and said, "Mr. Khamisa, you changed my life." I said, "Well, tell me more." He said, "I just graduated with a degree in finance, and I have a job at the Wells Fargo Bank because of you. I met you the first time when I was in seventh grade, and I know you were, if, you know you were a banker, and I decided to make you my role model and not follow my older brother, my father, and my grandfather, who were all gang involved." He was like a third or four generation gang members.

"Had you not showed up, I would've ended up in a gang." I spoke at Bishops in La Jolla because I live in La Jolla. Bishops is one of the most expensive schools, private schools, they have 800 students and 200 faculty. And I, costs, I dunno, 35, 40,000 a year to send your kids to Bishops, and most of those kids end up in Ivy League schools.

And after I spoke, this young lady came up to me and said the same thing, "Mr. Khamisa, you changed my life." And I said, "Tell me more." He said, "When I was in seventh grade, I was 14 years old, and that's when I met you the first time. I was put in the foster care system at the age of eight. So, when I met you at 14 years old, I was so moved with your story that I forgave my biological mother for all the pain that she'd caused me. I forgave all my foster parents for the confusion that they had caused in my life. I applied myself, won a scholarship to Bishops. I've just graduated with a 4.7, and I have a free ride at UCLA." This lady was so determined, I thought, you know what, she actually was a co-MC at our 25th anniversary five years ago, that someday she'll reform the, the foster care system in our country.

I also do work in corporations, teaching how you take conflict and create unity. And, I spoke at a, a corporation in San Diego. Three of the employees had gone through my program. And they were in, in middle school, and they all said the same thing. But, you know, we wouldn't be, we wouldn't have had this job had we not gone through your program. And we've measured also, to answer your question, Sam, we've had, uh, most of the universities and community colleges evaluate our safe school model. And, we cut suspensions and expulsions by 70 percent. So, think about it. If you suspend a kid and expel a kid, he's not in school, so where does he go? So, we have mentors on site, on campuses, where our programs are active. And we tell the teachers, don't suspend them. Send them to us. And, our mentors work with them during school, after school, and with their families. So, this work is definitely teachable.

Obviously, we are not a huge organization. And any nonprofit, the problems is resources. We have a waiting list for schools. And, I hope that before I pass on to the next world, that, uh, we can fund this as part of the Department of Education. Because only 35 percent of our population has an undergrad degree, and 14 percent have a second degree, and about three or four percent have a PhD, but most of them become parents. So, what we are teaching, I think, is as important as STEM, although I'm not suggesting we don't teach STEM, but I think we need to include the socio-emotional skills that build resiliency and alters people's decision making to build a better future. Even though they are born in the inner cities or have a lineage of gang membership, I find that the kids are, are resilient. Even, even when they go to high school, the teachers are surprised that your kids are so congenial and compassionate and polite and, and want to help other kids. We don't get that from other schools. So, they've taken these lessons to heart.

Sam Fuqua: Well, we're so grateful to you for taking the time to share your story, Tariq's story, Tony's story. Thank you for the overview of your journey, and thank you for the work you're doing.

Alexis Miles: And if I may say just personally, your son would be about 50 now, and I'm sure wherever he is, he is smiling with joy at the work that you're doing.

Azim Khamisa: Thank you.

Sam Fuqua: Azim Khamisa is the founder of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation. You can find them online at tkf.org. That's tkf.org.

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