Aaron Stark: I'm not rare. I'm just willing to talk about it. There's a lot of me's out there. There's a very small amount of people that are going to follow through with the attack, okay? But there's a large grey amount of people, grey area, that think that they could, should, or might, and that are getting pushed into that area by what I call the negative social economy, which is this dark underbelly of social media and social credit that accelerates that toxicity.

Sam Fuqua: That's Aaron Stark, 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 Aaron Stark about his journey from an abusive childhood to almost carrying out a mass shooting, and then becoming an advocate for mental health services and gun control. His TED talk, entitled, *I Was Almost a School Shooter*, has over 14 million views.

And a note that this program contains descriptions of violence that may be too upsetting for some listeners.

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

Alexis Miles: Hi, Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're very pleased to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Aaron Stark. Aaron, hello.

Aaron Stark: Hello. Thank you for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Glad to be speaking with you. Let's begin, uh, at the beginning of your story. Can you tell us about your childhood? You described yourself in your TED Talk as a perpetual new kid, and you described some, uh, pretty serious dysfunction in your home. Can you give our listeners a sense of, uh, of your upbringing?

Aaron Stark: For that, we'd have to start at the very beginning. My very first memory I ever had in my life, the zero point of my whole existence, is I'm laying on my bloody mom's body while I'm looking up at my father while he has a cross-shaped tire iron in his hand, and I'm screaming at him, "You just killed my mom." Now, she wasn't actually dead, but she was beaten bloody and unconscious. And that's, that's where I start. So, my birth to five was with my father, and that was like living in a Stephen King movie. The worst kind of physical violence you could ever imagine, beatings and rapes, and watching my mom getting beaten and raped in front of me, and me and my brother getting beaten and abused, and just horrendous, horrendous violence. Moving from battered woman's shelter to battered woman's shelter, and getting kidnapped from those. And then, my mom finally escaped him when I was five. Um, shipped me and my brother off to Oregon for a year, and that was actually just as toxic because toxicity and trauma rolls downhill and that was the hill my trauma was rolling from. So, like, my uncle in Oregon was a pedophile rapist and just really, really dark stuff all the way around.

When me and my brother moved back from Oregon after being out there for about a year, my mom had left my father and got with my stepdad. And, it went from Stephen King to Scarface. So, it went from extreme violence to crack cocaine, rocking up crack. They didn't want to hide anything from the kids, so

they just did it all in the living room. And so, I learned how to rock up crack when I was like six. You just get the, the skillet and the vial and the baking powder, and like, I learned, I learned the whole process when I was a little kid. One of the schools we went to, I actually took crack to school for show and tell, and that was one of the reasons why we evaporated. So, we lived a very nomadic lifestyle. Moving, I never went to school longer than, any school, longer than six months at any given school. I was constantly either getting evicted, or social workers were checking in, or police were trying to get us, or whatever it was, we were always on the move. My parents were very good liars, so we were getting evicted a whole bunch of times, but we also had a whole bunch of places we could move into.

It was a very toxic and criminal house, and I adopted that dark, criminal persona early on. It's like a detective mission that I'm, I am the fat, smelly one. I am the dirty one. And that, I, that was just kind of the identity that I, that I clung on to. My brother was two years older than me and he was the de facto man of the house. He had the responsibility taking care of everything, and I was a thing he had the responsibility of taking care of. And, my family was, my parents were just either drugged out and out of their minds or very abusive on their own. So, there was no support there and no, like, authority. So, it's like the ultimate latchkey kid. And so, going into my early teen years, that really started to form its shape that I was the dirty, fat, smelly one, and I was the nasty one. I was, got really toxic to people at school and I was filthy and I took to cutting myself when I was about 13 years old. It's like just self-harm. I describe my life back then, like I was living in this giant tsunami of pain, like this, there's waves sloshing back and forth, didn't really have any control over it. But when I cut myself, for some reason, that was like a, a normalcy that was mine, and it kind of grounded me in a way. And even though it was dark and destructive, it was real, and it was, it was personal.

And that got worse and worse as the abuse at home got worse and worse. I ended up leaving home when I was about 14, 13 or 14 years old, ended up running away from home. I couldn't take the abuse anymore. So, I started bouncing around from friend's house to friend's house, sleeping on couches and sleeping in the park. And, I developed a group of what I call disaster groupies. They weren't really friends of mine. They were kids that were around me that kind of lived vicariously through my darkness. It was kind of like an in person internet forum. Like, they kind of, they didn't, they, I'm like a dark unicorn. They push me as far off the edge as they can, see how far I could go. So, in this friend group, instead of sitting around talking about girls or sports or football, we talk about killing people. We talk about mass murder. Like if, if you were going to shoot a school, what would you do? How would you kill ten people? It was kind of like, that was the fiction of the group. And so, as I started getting into being a teenager, 15, 16 years old, the hell at home just got worse and worse and worse. The abuse from every angle was just so oppressive. I just couldn't, I, I, I fully ran into the idea that I was, I was the bad one. If, if you thought I was good, I'm, then you must be wrong. I'm, I'm actually a dirty monster. You must not know who I am.

Sam Fuqua: It's a deep level of trauma you're describing. But as I was listening to the description of your environment, I couldn't help but wonder why wasn't the social service system involved? Or were they?

Aaron Stark: They tried a couple times. They tried a couple times, but that was one of the reasons why we evaporated. That was one of the, either social workers trying to intervene, or police trying to intervene, or teachers, or any authority figures, would be one of the reasons why we would end up moving. And mind you, this was early 80s, so this was not, this is pre-internet, pre the age of interconnected systems, so one town doesn't talk to the other town, one school district doesn't talk to the other school district. So, it was a lot easier to be a kind of nomadic criminal where you bounce around from place to place without having

the system flag you and follow you around, and that was what they were taking advantage of. They relied on the fact that they can move into a place, lie to the landlord, say that they had all this rental history because there was no way to instantly check it out. My parents could lie to whatever jobs they were at, said they had all this resume because there was no way to check that out either. Until then, four months later, they discover that everything was a lie and then we'd have to evaporate, move. Or a social worker at school.

Here's, here's an actual example from something that happened to me in school. So, I went to a school one day, one of the schools I went to, I believe it was up in Oregon. Uh, 'cause we, we were always moving from state to state. We, when we moved, when we left one place, we didn't just move from city to city, it was across state lines. So, we would go to, usually from Oregon to Colorado, back and forth. I did that trip a lot. So, this was maybe third grade. I go, I, I was really dirty. I was filthy. I was wearing the same clothes all the time, showing up to school, basically smelling like feces. And I showed up to class one day and my teacher had brought a box. I, I came to school and it was a whole box of stuff. There was a coat and school supplies and like clothes and all these things. And the very next day we were out of the state. That was the signal that we needed to leave because that, that teacher was getting too close. There was someone investigating too much and we need to go. The nomadic lifestyle was really what prevented any authority from ever latching on.

Sam Fuqua: You're about to talk about another important person in this situation.

Aaron Stark: When I was 12, I lived at the end, an end of the block where at the other end, there was a kid named Mike. And Mike and I met at a comic book shop. Comic books were my main source of escape and all these places when we moved and all the abuse going on at home, I would have my nose buried in an X Men comic book or some Marvel comic. My comics were my main source of entertainment. And the only thing that I would bring with me, I would carry crates of comics across the country. And so, I met Mike at a comic shop. And, we bonded over deep conversation instantly. Like we went back to his house the first day we met and I just never left for like a week and a half. And we just, instant best friends. I was over at his house all the time, as much as I possibly could. And Mike lived the exact opposite life that I had. Mike had a very friendly family, very loving, supportive. There's parents still live in that house today. He went, he got to go to college. All of his dreams were encouraged. He did things that blew my mind. Like had a Christmas list. Like he would actually write his Christmas list and get the things on his list. And to me, that was just mind blowing. Like, oh my God, you could ask for things and get them?

So, while I'm living in this disaster groupie friends, he was kind of like, he was one of my home bases when I would have, when I would move from state to state, he never moved. So, I memorized his phone number. So, whenever I was in Denver, I could go to his house and stay. And his, his tool shed ended up being my, kind of my home base, my safe spot on the really, really bad nights. Because after a while, when we first became friends, when we were, when I was 12 or 13, I would spend weeks at his house. Like, I go over and just spend whole weeks at his house and his friend, his parents liked me and I was going to school and, but he never came to my house. 'Cause every time he did, there was nothing but hell and nothing but destruction and crime and drugs. And so, he never spent the night at my house once. But over the years, I got, I had gotten more and more toxic, and I had gotten more and more abrasive and aggressive and disgusting and, and filthy. And the cutting was getting really bad. And his tool shed ended up being kind of like my last spot because I couldn't sleep in his house anymore. His parents wouldn't let me sleep there, but he would let me sleep in his tool shed as long as his parents, as long as I was gone in the morning before his

parents arrived or got up, then I would be there. And occasionally, he'd like sneak me out dinner. He'd bring me out food and stuff while I was out there.

So, we finally come to one of these nights where I'm in the tool shed. It is like two o'clock in the morning. It's pouring down rain. It's like starting to snow. It's cold. The, it's important to note the, the shed's roof is like a wood slat so there's like gaps in the roof where you can see the stars in between. So the, it's dripping down rain on me. I'm in this big, big gray puffy recliner chair and I'm cutting myself so bad that there's a pool of blood forming underneath me. And, I think to myself, I got to get myself some help. I got to get some help or I'm going to die. And so, then that next morning, soon as the sun rose, I knocked on Mike's back door and I borrowed some bus fare and a phone book from his mom and I called social services on myself. And so, I set an appointment for later that afternoon. And when I got there, that was dawn when I called, three or four in the afternoon when I got there, they brought my mom in, and so we sit around at this table and they asked me, "So, what's your problem? What's wrong?" And I produce a bloody razor blade, square box cutter style razor blade. I say, "That's my problem. That's what's wrong." Throw it on the table. I said, my, raise my arm with cuts on it. I said, "I'm at the bottom. I feel like I'm nothing. I feel like I'm worthless."

And my mom, who is the most practiced liar I've ever known, she got them to believe I was just making it all up. And, "Oh yeah, he's just doing it for attention. He does this all the time. He, he just does it to, to get a rise out of me. It's okay." And they sent me home with her. And we get a couple blocks away from the social services office, she turns to me and she snarled. She says, "Next time you should do a better job and I'll buy you the razor blades." I'm like, okay, well then, I'm just gonna, you think I'm a monster then I'll show you a monster now. And so, for the next nine months, I dove into that dark. Like, before I would describe it like I was wearing it like a blanket. That spot I just go headlong in, I was all about it. So, I went on what I call my scorched earth time where for nine months I went on a purposeful, conscious action of trying to destroy every positive thing in my life. If you thought I was good, I was going to offend you. If there was anything nice about you, I was going to find whatever offended you and do that. And I, everybody. And during that period, I also like, charmed and snuck my way into every family members that I could and got into their photo albums, gathered every picture of me and burned them. Put them all in a pile and burned them. So the, currently there's only like six pictures of me in existence before the age of 15 because I just was trying to annihilate my past. It was a conscious effort that I was trying to destroy any positive opinion of me. I was gonna, I was gonna break it.

And so, after nine months of that, including stealing a bunch of comics from Mike, I am now alone and I'm in the field behind Casa Bonita, the restaurant Casa Bonita. For anybody who doesn't know, if you ever watched the show South Park, they actually did an episode about Casa Bonita. That's the restaurant they talk about. And the episode is accurate. Restaurant's really like that. So, I'm in the field behind that restaurant. And, I haven't taken my shoes off in weeks, but I wasn't wearing socks. My feet were literally rotting off my body. I was surviving off of free samples from the grocery store in the, in the strip mall, and evading the police. And, I woke up one morning and it was so cold that I couldn't barely walk to get to the store to get free samples in the morning. Like, I was shaking so bad from from the cold. It wasn't just shaking. It was like seizing, like, like, just absolute, my arms couldn't hold still. I could barely breathe, and I'm like, I'm, I gotta do something. I'm gonna die. I gotta get myself some help. And so, across the street from the school that I was nominally at, I had to be enrolled in school because if you weren't enrolled in school and weren't at the school grounds, the truancy officers would come and arrest you.

So I had to be, during the day I had to be at the school, but I didn't ever go into class except for, I did attend choir class every day and I went to English class all the time. It was the only two classes I ever went to. But because I missed so many days, I failed. I, I, I, I got five credits my entire high school career. I failed as a freshman. So, across the street from the school I was nominally at was a building that said *Mental Health*. Now, I didn't know what it was for, I didn't know what it was about, but I knew it said mental health, and I knew the last time I warned someone I was coming, and I'm not doing that again because that was the worst thing that ever happened. So, I just showed up cold. And I went to go see. And it was a treatment center or a counseling center. And they had me see this young lady, she was in her early twenties. And I don't really remember much about that conversation because all I really remember is the end when I said, "I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do. I can't help you." Right then that spot, my brain broke, and like snapped like a mirror. And, I found out what was at the bottom of that tsunami of pain. When you go all the way down to the bottom of it, it gets really quiet and it gets really still. And, because there's nothing left to lose. There, there's nothing, there's nothing left to care about. What are you going to do? You're going to cut my arm off? I'm going to die. You're going to run me over? Cool. Are you going to put me in jail? Are you going to feed me? Like, I don't have any more down.

And right then all my plans crystallized. Everything I knew, all, all the toxin from all those disaster, disaster groupie friends about where I was going to go, that just snapped into focus. I knew right where to go. I was either going to go into the mall food court or my school food court. The only difference in that was going to be the time of day I got the gun. And I knew where to get a gun because this was early 90s, mid 90s. So, this was like boys in the hood era. It was before the age of metal detectors in school. So, people would routinely bring pistols and stuff into school and flash them around. And there was a group of gangbangers that hung out next to the ROTC building that they would bring guns in all the time. And they knew I wasn't a narc. They sold drugs to my family. They knew me. So, I knew I was sleeping in the park, stuff like that. So I went to them like, "Hey, can you get me a gun? Hopefully one that shoots a lot of bullets." “There's, uh, cash here, give me three days.” So that was it. I was set. Oh no, it was, I had to give him weed. Give me, you know, give me a gun with a lot of bullets. He said, "Yeah, give me an ounce of weed." That was the easiest part. That's why, that's the, that's one I always kind of skip over. That's the easiest.

I went to my mom's house, was a druggie sleeping on the floor, so, an ounce of weed out of his pocket and gave it to him. And then you're like, there you go. There's three days. So in that timeframe, that three days, I was set. As soon as I got the gun, I was going to commit the attack. The instant I got the weapon from him, I was going to grab the weapon, go commit the attack. Like, there wasn't going to be any savoring or anything like that. And in that three day period, I didn't know what I was doing then, but looking back, I think I was saying bye. I think I was going to the people that I cared about in a much more peaceful way, and much more calmly, and like, saying my actual feelings, and doing things like giving away my comic books, and like much more calmly and peacefully than not nearly as aggressive and abrasive as before. And in that time, I went to Mike's house. And Mike opened up the door and he saw me, and he didn't know what I had planned. He still didn't know what I had planned until 2018 when he, came out my story.

But he knew really well the hell that I had been living in. Like, he was the one that I was crying to after I cut myself and my mom laughed at me. And he was the one that I would, told about the, I should do a better job and I'll buy you the razor blades. He was the one that I, he, it was his shed that I would sleep in when I didn't have any home. So, he knew the hell that I had and he just brought me in and treated me like I was a person. And when I knocked on that door, I felt like I was a walking ball of nothing. Just destruction waiting to explode. Like my humanity was gone. I wasn't a person. I wasn't a human. I was just waiting to destroy.

And when he brought me in and treated me like I was just a kid who was in pain, it wasn't just hanging out with a friend, it was like being handed the tiny granular bits of humanity that reminded me that I could exist. Like, oh, I can like something. I can enjoy food. I can like a movie. I can exist five minutes from now and be okay. And it was absolutely life changing. It was like rolling the clock back on my humanity. And I didn't leave Mike's house for over a week. And I never went and got the gun. And he's still my best friend to this day.

Sam Fuqua: Wow. Well, thank you for sharing all of that. I'm still kind of processing a lot of that story, Aaron.

Aaron Stark: Well, while, while you do that, let me give you one second half really quick. So, fast forward, because it's important to note that it's not like a light switch flipped and ding, everything's better. Okay. It was like, like I had reached this like trauma bubble, this like about to burst kind of pimple kind of scenario. And what he did was like, push the waves back and like receded the pressure. Put the clock back on my humanity for a while. But my situation was basically the, still the same. The hell at home was still the same, the drug abuse at home, all the fighting, that never stopped up till this day. Like that's still the same. So, that kind of chaos was still going. Mike did help me slightly shift my living situation. He did get me, let me sleep with one of his friends for a while. I was, I was over at his house. And like, I, I kind of shifted my living situation. But really, the, what happened was that my personality had kind of reasserted. My humanity had kind of taken forward again. And I actually ended up being really depressed and really remorseful about what I had planned. I was really ashamed about it all.

And so, now fast forward to my, the night of my 19th birthday, okay? So, night of my 19th birthday, that kind of bubble had risen again, but not towards any homicide, but more towards suicide. I just wanted to end my life. I wanted to commit suicide the night of my 19th birthday. I was planning on it. And the day of my 19th birthday, I was trying to act like nothing went wrong. Like, I had nothing wrong with me at all. So, I was trying to act as normal as possible. And my plan of suicide was I was going to do by overdose. So, I had gotten a whole bunch of LSD that I bought off the streets. I got multiple bottles of pills from my mom because she was a walking medicine cabinet. And I stole a whole bunch of cocaine from my mom too. And I have way more drugs than we needed to do the job. Like I was planning on going to the field behind Casa Bonita and taking all those drugs and killing myself on my 19th birthday.

But the day, like I said, I was trying to act like everything was normal. And I had people intervene and stuff in the past when I was depressed, I didn't want anything like that to happen, so I was just trying to act like as regular as possible. So, during the day I went to Mike's house. And I figured that's the best way, best, last day, spend it with my best friend and then go kill myself. And so during that day Mike, I go to Mike's house and Mike is a very friendly person himself. Mike has a friend group of his own. And one of his friends is a girl named Amber. And Amber was always really friendly with me. She never had a problem with me, but she was definitely his contact, but she was his friend. They went to school together or whatever. And so, we would occasionally go over to Amber's house and hang out, like watch movies, listen to music, do whatever. And she was cool. So he's like, yeah, we're going to kick it at Amber's today. Like, yeah, that's, that's a great last day, I think, you know, I'm gonna go spend it with two of my favorite people, maybe go listen to a really good music and watch a movie, maybe have a nice meal and then go back and kill myself in the field. And we get to Amber's house, and that wasn't what it was for at all. It was actually a surprise birthday party for me. And I walked into a room full of about 14 people saying happy birthday, and Amber had baked me a blueberry peach pie, and I walked past her and went to the bathroom and dropped all my drugs in the

toilet, and that was the last time I ever tried to kill myself. And Amber's also one of my best friends. I just went and saw a concert with her last month.

Alexis Miles: Aaron, that is a pretty remarkable story. That, that story of your life. And when I listen to you, I hear so many ways to unpack this, you know, a story of trauma, family trauma. I, I believe your birth father was a Vietnam vet.

Aaron Stark: Yes.

Alexis Miles: Your parents were drug abusers. Just so much trauma for at least a couple of generations. And I also hear bullying, violence, and other pieces of that story. So, it's remarkable to me that you have come out on the side of kindness. So, both kindness to oneself and kindness to other, and love, as antidotes to that. Can you talk more about how you reached that conclusion?

Aaron Stark: It started with the germ of the idea of the same reason why I've never smoked a cigarette. I watched my parents do every drug they could do and smoke cigarettes constantly. And I never saw what you got out of it. I never saw anything but coughs and bad breath and smelling like crap. I never understood. Smoking weed, you, you ended up getting stoned. I could, I could rationalize that, you know. And then, you look at the long term of people that do it, you know, you got long term crack users. You got, I saw people that were just strung out and nasty and saw people smoking cigarettes, strung out and nasty. And I saw people that have anger and violence, and did it for years. And it's the same, that same kind of click that, early on, it was like, I don't want to do that. I don't want to be that person when I get older. I see what it's like when you spend your life hating yourself and hating everybody around you, and I didn't want to do that. And so, I started on the process of what I call acknowledgement, which is the most important step that I took, in my opinion, where I went to the people that hurt me and acknowledged what happened. It was important to not do it in an accusatory way. To not say you did this and you need to pay, and you need to make up for it or any of that stuff. It was much, it was all, only that this happened, our relationship has fundamentally changed, I don't actually love you and I'm done. And, it had nothing to do with what their response was.

It started, that started when I was, I was actually working at a bar with my, my mom was my boss, and I was working at a Veterans of Foreign War, War's bar, of all places. And my aunt happened to be one of the people I was serving a drink to. And she was also in people who got massively drunk, tried to kill herself in front of me and did massive amounts of drugs and crack and abuse and she was part of that whole thing. And she's sitting there and she's like, "Oh, you know, you love me." And I stopped. I said, "No, actually, I don't." And she stops. "No, you do." "No, I actually don't. I'm sorry. I don't actually love you." And it was like instantly a weight lifted off. Was like, like releasing something. And I walked away. And that started a process where I went to everybody that did that. And some of them screamed, some of them yelled, some of them cried. And I didn't care what your response was. It had nothing to do with that. I would just say my piece and walk. And it was about getting it off of me. Because now, I never, I don't carry around any of those regrets about, man, I wish I could tell that person that thing. I wish they could really know how I felt. If I could just say that. I said it all. I said it, they know it, they know how I feel, and I could let it go. And I could set it down and walk away. And be able to finally focus on me and how to make myself better.

That finally really came before when I had my first kid. When my first kid was born, I was like, yeah, I, I have something that I love that is separate from me that matters, that I will fight to the death for that's separate than me. That really gave me the fuel that I needed to continue to push forward. But honestly, up until 2018, when I came out with my story, I still thought, I still hated myself over it, I still thought that it would be a big, black mark, that if anybody ever really found out about my story, that they'd hate me, and that, that it would be this millstone around my neck that I'd have to carry around, and this weight that everybody would judge me about. And then, that's not at all what happened. Like, at all. And instead, I wrote a simple Facebook post the day after the Parkland massacre, and in it I came out with, I was almost a school shooter. That wasn't for public consumption. That was just for my family and for my close friends. It was just a simple Facebook post. I was just a regular dude. And then the local news wanted me, came and filmed me reading that Facebook post and Channel 9 news put it on the air and that got 17 million views in a week.

And I started getting hit from all over the planet with messages from literally every corner of the globe and every country, in India, Pakistan, New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland, everybody. And it wasn't just, "Hey, that's a cool story." In fact, most of it wasn't, "Hey, that's a cool story." It was, "Hey, that's a cool story. Here's all of my pain." And, "Here's everything that ever happened to me." And, "Here's all of my diary and all my abuse." And I saw firsthand the commonality of human experience, that there isn't any difference. It was really cathartic for me that there's not any difference in the pain that I was feeling when I was at my absolute bottom and I was about to shoot up a school, than the pain that a model feels when she's throwing up in a cup before a photo shoot. That that's not different. It looks like two different things, but really that's the same creature. And that sense that I'm not good enough in myself, I need to burn myself apart to fit my world, I think is at the basis of most of our struggles we're facing right now. And it's the one bipartisan thing we have, because it doesn't matter what, whether you're atheist or religious or Democrat or Republican or conservative or liberal or rich or poor, doesn't matter, any of those things. That same sense that I'm not good enough, we've all felt that at one time or another, just to different degrees. And, it's kind of sad that that might be the one bipartisan thing that can bring us together. But if it can, then I'm going to try to help heal that divide as much as I possibly can.

Alexis Miles: It sounds like that is the time that you became consciously a mental health advocate.

Aaron Stark: Yeah, in 2018, 2018, 2019 is when I really consciously decided to put my full effort into it. And now, if I can help even one person not become me by talking about my dark past, then I'm going to keep on talking until they don't have a voice. Like, I'm, I'm just going to keep on going because I, I think I just have to. Like, I work full time at a gas station and do all this active, activism stuff just on the side because I think someone should.

Alexis Miles: Aaron, if you were speaking to someone, a young person, or a friend of a young person, who you knew was suffering in, in the ways that you've described, what is the best thing that a person could do to support, or be an ally to someone who's suffering?

Aaron Stark: Listen without judgment. And remember that that person is going to test. When I was in the dark, my darkest spot, everybody around me saw that I was either, everybody in my life, I was either something that they fear or something they wanted to fix. I was either a monster or a project. They were afraid of me or, or they had something they could do to help me. And in none of that was being a person. None of that was acknowledging me for me, you know. And, the one person who did, Mike, that saw me for

me, he had to withstand all of the things that I threw at him. All of the aggression that I threw. All of the sadness and all of the trauma and all of the anger that I was taught and how to speak. All, the entire vocabulary of aggression that I was taught how to speak. He had to listen to all of it, stand still, and take it all. And be able to be the island of normal in my ocean of chaos, wouldn't move no matter how many times I crashed against it. He just didn't change. He never, he never moved. He never judged. That's what you need to do. You need to be the person that can withstand the tests because that person in the dark, when they're seeking out for help. They're going to assume that everybody in their world, everybody they're trying to reach out for help, probably already thinks that they failed. That they've judged it already. And I'm a failure, and this person knows I'm a failure, so they're not going to help me, and they already know that I'm wrong. Or that I'm, I'm not good enough for this help, so I don't deserve it, so I'm not really going to try all the way to do it anyway. Or this person doesn't really believe me, so he's full of crap, so I'm going to show him that he's full of crap, and I'm going to know, I'm going to show him that I didn't deserve the help in the first place.

Then you have to be able to withstand all of that, stand through it and be able to be like, no, you're a good person. You can make it through. You're going to be okay. See the person who is screaming instead of the words being screamed. You've heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where you have the pyramid, okay? Where you have the bottom level, where you need to have the base survival. You have to have shelter, food, water. You need to have your base survival needs in order to want something. If you can want, if, you know, in order to need something. If you can need something, you can want something. You can want something, you can desire, then you can aspire, then you can flourish. This is this pyramid of, of, of ascension. Take that concept and flip it upside down. So it's a pyramid going down, okay? That bottom point is that self-immolation I was talking about, that I'm not good enough in me. Now as that, that top plane of it is all the expressions of that pain. So, on one side you have the school shooter, and you have the model in the car who's throwing up, and you have the gangbanger who's trying to fit into his click. You have the right wing extremist who's trying to, who's harassing an abortion clinic, someone who's going to close his doors because he's trying to get social clout. You have the CEO who is embezzling. All these various forms of self-destructive, self-determinative pain that we have layered upon each other, okay?

And in order to get to that top plane from that bottom kernel, we are taught how to express our emotional vocabulary. So, boys are taught early on that violence is currency. That it's not only a status symbol, it's actual currency in the male world. You can be dumb. You can be smelly. You can be fat. You can be ugly. If you can break something, you can exist in the male world, okay? So, violence becomes currency. Now if violence is currency, and if your home life is abject hell and all you're taught is lying and stealing and aggression and anger, then that's the vocabulary that you're going to learn. That vocabulary will grow and sprout and become bigger and bigger and you'll get volumes and volumes of how to express that anger and rest. For, for women, not being a woman myself, of course, but I have raised multiple daughters. I'm, I'm a father of many daughters. And from what I've seen from women, it seems to be more introspective. The depression germ starts out that I'm not good enough. My body's not good enough. My beauty's not good enough. My brain's not good enough. I'm not worthy enough. And that can turn into eating disorders and beauty disorders and, and lack of self-identity, lack of self-worth, and that can then sprout too. And, and depending on how, what your vocabulary is taught.

So then you, now you take that to its middle position, okay? You look at that pyramid now in its middle stage. You have a kid who, you have a young man, okay, started out life hating himself. Started out life hating, having that aggression as currency. His whole life is violence and abject pain. He's taught nothing

but aggression with people who's around him. So when he is a teen, he's like reaching out for help, how do you expect him to walk into a counseling office and have, say anything that's actually calm and rational about how he feels? How can that be a thing that we're expecting of these kids? Because their, their entire vocabulary is aggression and pain and anger. So, that turns counseling into spikes that are pointed inside the room. Because the kid can walk in there and say one thing that's going to blow up his entire world because he's venting in the way that fits his home life and fits his, his entire world perfectly. But that counselor that said one thing that's going to trigger something for their own liability and then stop any kind of counseling. So that kid, you won't even reach out for help because that turns into the kind of pain. That's the peril that the kid thinks about every time that he's trying to reach out for help is that someone's going to hurt me.

If I try to go get help, my mom's going to go to jail and my brother's going to go to foster care. My dad's going to go to jail and my siblings are going to go, but all because I got help. That's a long rambling way to say, be the person who can withstand all of that chaos and stay there and be the steady one and still, still show the love, even when it shoved away a bunch of times, because eventually the shoving will stop and you will be that ocean island of normal in the ocean of chaos. You'll be the one that can withstand it. And if you take it to a counseling level, you have two different kinds of counselors. One kind, you go to get help, you have checklists, you have programs, you have systems, and that turns into static. It's just, I'm a program, I'm something on your checklist, you know, that white noise is going to wash right over me. Go to counselor two. Oh, you like that band? I like that band. Let's listen for a while. You get a humanization level. Equalize the communication level. Ten minutes later, you get the same checklist, you get the same journal, you get the same process. But you listen now because that person saw you as a human. Counselor A, you never go to again. Counselor B, you invite that counselor to Christmas dinner.

Sam Fuqua: I want to ask you about another aspect of your story. You talked about the ease at which you were able to get a handgun when you were a kid. And even though that was, that was decades ago, in many ways, it's even easier now for adults at least to obtain and carry handguns. In addition to advocating for improved mental health care and services, you also advocate for gun control, and that is certainly an area where there is not bipartisan agreement.

Aaron Stark: I tend to only mention the terms mental health and gun control to say that you shouldn't use the terms gun control or mental health. Because the terms themselves are innately obfuscating. So, if you say the term gun control at all, you get lost into the details of the argument. Is that a bump stock? Is that, kind of rifle is that? Kind of ammunition is that? And you get lost into the minutiae of the details. And you lose sight of the goal of that argument, which is what I try to push for, which is keep hand, keep weapons that can kill a lot of people out of the hands of someone who thinks they need to blow themselves up to fit their world. Like that has, there has to be a rational way to get that spot. And mental health, on the other side of it, is this big gray amorphous blob. It's, it's this cloud. It's really personal, but it's really oblique. Can't really wrap your hands around it because you can't really penetrate it too much because it questions your personal. So it just turns into this big gray blob, mental health. And so, both sides of that, you kind of divert from the actual tenor of the conversation, only because you branch off into both sides of it, and both sides lose sight of the goal, which in my opinion, there has to be a rational and, and, and, and reasonable compromise that we can make saying that you gun owner with your, with your license and all your rifles, you're not the dude I really care about. You're not really the problem. I don't really care about the gun owner in Texas that has 50 rifles on this farm. You're not the dude I'm worried about.

I'm worried about the guy who has one AR 15 who's stocking up with all of his ammunition because he thinks he needs to blow apart his world because nobody sees him. So, it's not so much about keeping guns out of everybody's hands, it's about keeping weapons that can kill people out of the hands of people who want to kill. In my estimation, the problem from both angles of it, both the mental health aspect and the gun control aspect, and the reason why I try to get more granular with details of it, is because of both sides tend to want a panacea. You tend to want something, one thing that's going to fix all the problems. If we can't have this one gun law that's going to stop all gun crimes, if we can't ban all assault rifles, and on mental health, same kind of thing. If we can't have this one law that's going to fix all mental health issues, then we're just not going to go anywhere. And in my opinion, we need to make tiny incremental movements on both sides to start getting somewhere at all. So, make small changes to the gun laws. And then eventually you'll make four or five small changes that amount to one substantial change. Same thing with mental health. We need to start making incremental changes. But this current push for everybody to have a fix all movement because they want to solve gun control, that's the only reason why I, I try to solve that.

So, it's just the terminology aspect of what I wanted to correct there because the main goal of it, in my opinion, should just be look at who I was 30 years ago. There's a lot, I'm not a unicorn. I'm not rare. I'm just willing to talk about it. There's a lot of me's out there. There's a very small amount of people that are going to follow through with the attack. Very small amount, okay? But there's a large gray amount of people, gray area, think that they could, should, or might, and that are getting pushed into that area by what I call the negative social economy, which is this dark underbelly of social media and social credit that accelerates that toxicity. In using the methods that you're going to be a great person, you can be fulfilled, and you can be a good guy. But to be a good guy, you have to be terrible to that guy. And there's a whole troll culture that's set up to do that, and a whole negative society that's set up to do that. So it's multifaceted. So when, when I just, gun control, I tend to never talk about.

Sam Fuqua: The phrase, in your view, is overly broad?

Aaron Stark: Instead of saying gun control, I get specific. And same thing with mental health. I talk about mental health issues. I talk a lot about mental health and mental wellness issues. But instead of saying the term mental health, I describe it as, as humanly as possible that I was abused and neglected and felt like I was worthless because I was trying to scream out like I was a walking ball of nothing. The more I can say that, and the more that when people see that, they might see a face instead of a label. And because we have a tendency as humanity to labelize and quantitize everything and turn it into a project. It's that turning things into a project and not seeing the humanity that I'm trying to avoid the most. So I can, I've been able to talk to people who are gun collectors, hardcore right wingers, major gun lovers, that can see that there has to be a common ground. That you, you're not the one I would care about. If you're registered, you have training, you have the license, do what you gotta do, dude. You're right, it's in the, it's in the constitution. You wanna own the gun, own the gun. But do you want me to own the gun 30 years ago? And what can we do to, to mitigate both sides of that? Because it's important to note that nobody ever starts life in the pitch black. Nobody ever starts there. You have to get there. And if we focus all of our efforts on stopping the end result, then we will continually have people coming out of the path.

It's the same kind of argument I use against when people talk about arming the schools and hardening the targets at schools. If, if your main goal is to harden the target at the school and to limit entryways down to one and to arm the teachers, then you're still not doing anything to address the kid who's screaming at in

pain. And I've said this to federal agencies and to the heads of major law enforcement or your agencies, that you can get the same impact from putting every bar in every window and arming every teacher and training every single security guard and putting a whole police department in your school, as you can from one day of pizza parties and games and actually hanging out with your student. You can get the same impact. Just listen to the kids. And I, what I really think that we should do is ask the kids what they want. Ask the kids in schools, what do they think that we should do? Because when I go to talk to different agencies, when I talk to, I'll go and speak to administrators and law enforcement and to students. So, three different audiences tend to be what I go and talk to. And the teachers and administrators and law enforcement, I have to spend all the time kind of deprogramming biases and, and reminding them that they were a kid and showing them the humanity of it.

I go talk to the students. They speak this language fluently. They know exactly what I'm talking about, and they know who in their class is the problem. They know what kids can't, can't reach out for help. They know what kids are struggling with self-identity issues. They know which kids are falling into the extremist level. Like, they see all of this in real time because they're carrying the sum total of human knowledge in their pockets and are massively interconnected with all of their peers. And so they see all of that. So, I think that one of the biggest resources that we could possibly have is actually ask the kids, because I've seen polls on what, ask the parents what we should do to stop, to reach out for the kids in the dark, and what should we, can we do to stop school violence. I've seen the, the law enforcement studies and I've seen school studies. I haven't seen anybody talking to the kids about it. I haven't seen anybody talking to the, to the kids who are more socially connected than any of the adults could even imagine at their age.

Sam Fuqua: You have four kids, is that right?

Aaron Stark: I do.

Sam Fuqua: So, what are the most important things that you and your wife try to, to give your children?

Aaron Stark: The biggest important thing is respect. That's the biggest thing I give my children is respect and acknowledgement. Their feelings are just as valid as anybody else's feelings. Just because they haven't had them for very long doesn't mean they're not as worthy. So I use my parenting, what happened to me, and I tell my kids this all the time, I use it as exact examples of how to parent my own children. I just do the opposite of what happened to me. So I will do stuff like, every time I talk to my kids and I love them. Every message I say, “I love you.” Every single time. So much of the noise. I am at every game. I'm at every performance. My house is the house where all the kids can come and stay. And all of my children have gone to the same schools. Like all four of my kids are Westy Wolves. Every one of them. And that's because that stability to me was really important. But all that is just setting for the most important thing, which is the respect and acknowledgement that if my kids have an issue, they can come talk to me about it. And they can, they can put me to task if I have a problem. They can question anything that I say. The rule in the house is, you can question anything I do as long as it's not, without insult, without anger. If you're coming at me with logic, then I better beat your logic with logic. Because if you win, then you win. That's the way this house rolls.

Like, if you could, if you can beat me with an actual logical argument, then I have to listen. I, I can't just deny you because there's never a time where it's, it's that way because dad says it's that way. No. I have to

have a reason and I have to give you the reason to treat you with respect and boundaries and space and emotional intelligence and acknowledgement. And I see the tangible benefits of it all the time. Because like I said, my house is the house where all the kids want to come hang out. Like, where the house where I'll, I'll walk into my house and have a whole herd of teenage girls just wandering through. I might know three of them, you know, but they're fine. They'll be just hanging out all day long. And to me that means I won, because I, my kids tell me I'm their best friend. I won.

Alexis Miles: Thank you for that. I believe that you have a Facebook group called *YouAreNotAlone*. Do you still have that group? And can you tell us a little bit about it?

Aaron Stark: I do. My, my Facebook is called *YouAreNotAlone*. It's all one word, but each word capitalized, *YouAreNotAlone*. And that group has been absolutely amazing. It's gotten over, it's over 3, 000 members and like 170 different countries. And it's full of not only people who are reaching out in pain and need help, but also has a bunch of doctors and therapists and professionals, as people. Like not in the doctorly role. So, it kind of gives that buffer area to some people where they can come and express themselves and kind of vent a little bit without having that initial crackdown of, uh, on language, but also potentially being able to get support when needed because of all the professionals in the group. It just has been great. It's been a self-perpetuating positivity machine. That group alone, it's, hasn't been my effort, this has been a group effort that's been doing it. I've, I've helped, but this is a group thing that we've done. It has prevented over 30 suicides. It has prevented more than three school shootings. And it has kept more than 10 people from falling into white nationalism. So, that's like my prize achievement. If I have, and it just keeps on growing on its own, that just rolls and helps. And it's just people being people. People that are there to reach out and actually listen and that we can care. And it's just a small Facebook group, which makes me wonder what could happen if something like that were an actual project and an actual policy. Like, to give people a buffer area so they can, so they can express and be themselves without having so many swords of Damocles hanging over their heads.

Alexis Miles: Aaron, if you had the power right in this moment to take one action that might make a difference in the world, so that all people are treated as fully human, and internally, have that experience, "I am worthy. I am human. I am worth love and respect," what would that one thing be that you would do or say?

Aaron Stark: That's a hard one. You know, I think the biggest, this is going to be a weird answer. The most impactful single action I think we could take to like instantly short circuit the negativity in the world is to have all the regular adult people go on to all the 4chan and Reddit and incel subgroups and just hang out there. Like, like I call it pull a Facebook. Facebook used to be cool for the kids. Facebook used to be where all the kids would go to hang out, tell all their stuff to you. And like, then all the grandparents went to Facebook and now none of the kids are on Facebook because it's all the parents. So it's not nearly as cool. And I, I, from what I've found, the toxic subculture that I talk about, which is legit, and is the biggest force for negativity in the world that I can see it relies on secrecy and on people being hidden and thinking, Oh, I'm doing something secret. I'm doing something bad. And the more that regular normal people get involved in that, just kind of stand there and like, yeah, no, that's kind of stupid. I think that would short circuit it. I think that would actually do it. But on a bigger level, I think the biggest thing I would do would be to try to improve compassion. Just remember that the person who is across from you, the one who you think of as different than you, is not as nearly as different as you think, and to give love to the people that you feel deserve it the least because they need it the most, and sometimes that person is yourself.

Sam Fuqua: Well, Aaron Stark, thank you for sharing your powerful story with us and with the world. It's been great to talk with you.

Aaron Stark: Thank you for having me.

Sam Fuqua: Aaron Stark describes himself as a global positivity advocate. He's a keynote speaker and creator of the Facebook group, *YouAreNotAlone*. His email is aaronstarkauthor@gmail.com.

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