

Neighbors, Episode 5.2

Matt Got Shot (Part 1)

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Segment 1

Jakob Lewis Hey -- Jakob here. This story has some violence and language that is not recommended for young listeners. Now is your chance to turn it off. Otherwise, here we go.

Matt Lovell Do you wanna start here and then we can walk up to the Red Door?

Jakob Lewis Yeah.

Matt Lovell And... I actually haven't. Yeah, we can walk up there.

Jakob Lewis You haven't what?

Matt Lovell I haven't been back there since except to pop in to say hey one time. But yeah.

Jakob Lewis It's a beautiful sunny day in June, less than half a year after Matt Lovell almost died. He said he would show me the spot in East Nashville where it happened. It's near a trendy bar district called Five Points. Matt's been back to this spot a few times since that night, but not to walk through what happened with another person.

Jakob Lewis Ok, well, I guess I just want to check in with you. Right now, where are you at, before we start walking?

Matt Lovell Where am I at right now? I think we should just walk.

Jakob Lewis Matt pulls a small bottle of lavender essential oil out of his pocket and offers me some. I dab a little on my wrist and neck, taking his lead. He says it's good for anxiety. He's wearing a blue baseball cap and sporting a short scraggly beard. I can tell he's thrown a little, but I can also tell he's trying not to be, he's trying to be ok. And sometimes he his, laughing and talking about his friends. But other times he won't look me in the eye, or he changes the subject by saying "I'm not ready to talk about that yet," or "That's personal."

But the day is really pleasant. We walk in a neighborhood called Lockeland Springs. But after about one block, suddenly Matt stops. And he starts talking like we're on a live broadcast.

Matt Lovell Hello internet, it's nice to see you. It's about 80 degrees here in Nashville, and we are standing right where I got shot.

Jakob Lewis Wait, it's right here?

Matt Lovell Right here at Five Points, I'm actually shaking a little. But I was parked...

Jakob Lewis Matt was sitting in a car by the side of the road on a cold evening, below freezing. It was January 20th. Inauguration day. A teenager tapped on the glass with a pistol, some words were exchanged. The man cocked his gun, and then shot Matt right in the chest. Matt screamed and took off running down the street to the steps of a local bar. He came very close to dying. There were hours of surgery, and then somehow he came out on the other side. But that shot—such a violent moment—set off a course of events that were simultaneously damaging and healing. Terrible and wonderful.

I'm Jakob Lewis, and from Nashville Public Radio, you're listening to Neighbors -- a show about what connects us. Today's story: "Matt Got Shot Part 1."

Matt Lovell I love how lush it is in Tennessee this time of year. You know they say we live in this valley, this bowl, so that's why we have so much diversity of trees and plants because all the seeds just blow their way kind of into the bowl. So this time of year it's just all these crazy different kinds of foliage come out, so this neighborhood in particular is very lush to me and it's been a great place for me to heal.

Jakob Lewis After the harrowing walk at ground zero of the shooting, Matt drives me to his house. He rents a place tucked away deep in a quiet neighborhood in East Nashville. Every house seems to have a small concrete stoop. He shares the place with his roommate Jo-lynn.

Matt Lovell And you drive up and we have a little, this is my little garden. I think we just ran over something. I haven't been driving much since the shooting. I don't know why. I just don't prefer it.

Jakob Lewis I didn't know it at the time, but the car we were in was the car Matt was shot in. We get out and he shows me his garden—something that he started doing more of after he was shot. There are plants clustered on the ground in pots. On the edge of a serene patio there's some ornamental grasses. There's bushes, flowers, elephant ears. Matt takes a second to water them all. He says it's healing for him.

Matt Lovell My Ma Ma was a big gardener and so is my mom. So, my mom's whole family was like gospel singers and gardeners, so I think I'm just a product of that, you know.

Jakob Lewis As Matt goes about watering, I notice an old window leaned up against the house. It has a saying painted on it, "Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can". Only, some of the glass is missing. Matt finishes watering and we go inside to get a drink.

Jakob Lewis Well, it's interesting because it says, "start where you are, hat you have..."

Matt Lovell I know, the windows broken, the wind blew it over the other day. We're drinking out of jars. The wind blew in the other day and blew it over.

Jakob Lewis It's kind of symbolic.

Matt Lovell I try not to think into everything. Do you want just water?

Jakob Lewis Yeah!

Matt Lovell Cool.

Jakob Lewis Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can. Let's start with where Matt was before the shooting.

Matt Lovell Well, I grew up in the South, in the church, as a gay person. Like a lot of people I had a lot of complicated feelings. I left the church about 10 years ago. And, um, I think even after a decade I still carried around a lot of residue, and kind of flaky paint.

Jakob Lewis Flaky paint?

Matt Lovell Yeah, I call it flaky paint. Shame, or doubt, or worry, like. Am I okay, just as I am?

Jakob Lewis Matt had come out a while ago, but as a young man there was a series of hurtful events and abruptly ending relationships that really affected him. He asked me not to mention the specifics, but they left a mark. They brought along voices that played like old tapes in his head. They told him he wasn't acceptable just as he was. And no matter how far down the road he got into embracing himself, it seems he just couldn't shake the deep rooted question of: am I, me, who I am... Am I okay? And it seems people close to him could tell. A few years before the shooting, Matt's brother gave him a card on his birthday.

Matt Lovell I remember on my 30th birthday, I remember, um. Sorry. It's almost like he knew cause he wrote this card to me. And he said I know some things are ahead for you,

and they're good and they're hard, but you've got what it takes, and then he signed the card, "Be at peace with yourself."

Jakob Lewis That last bit, "Be at peace with yourself," is from a song. Matt played me a little bit of it from his phone. It's by a guy named Bill Fay, and the lyrics say, "At the end of the day, ain't nobody else gonna walk in your shoes, quite the way you do, so be at peace with yourself, keep a spring in your heel and keep climbing that hill."

Three years go by, and it was January 20th, 2016.

Donald Trump We will make America great again! Thank you, God bless you, and God bless America!

Matt Lovell And that is inauguration day, if you're trying to forget.

Jakob Lewis Matt was writing a song with his friend Leigh Nash. She is the lead singer for the band Sixpence None the Richer. You all know the song "Kiss Me".

Matt Lovell We had actually been in a songwriting session and cut things off halfway through the song because we were both just feeling a little heavy that day. I'm not going to get political, but you catch my drift.

Jakob Lewis They went to a thrift store called the Hip Zipper. They grabbed some lunch and then ended up at a bar called the Red Door Saloon. After some time there Matt left down the patio ramp after sunset, about 7:30 p.m., and walked to his car.

Matt Lovell And I was texting my aunt, and heard a tap on my window and of course that was the gunman. And you can kind of figure out what happened from there.

Jakob Lewis A security camera from across the street caught the whole thing. Now, a warning, this is very hard to hear. I'm going to take some time to set up the scene so if you don't want to hear the actual shooting, skip ahead now.

This audio I'm about to play is from a camera put on somebody's front porch because they owned an Airbnb. In the footage, you see the porch with an American flag hanging vertically in the left of the frame. It was put out for inauguration day. On the right is a porch light that kind of washes out that whole side, and across the street you see Matt sitting in his black Kia Soul. A man walks from the left of the frame down the street and stops at Matt's car. It looks like maybe there's some words exchanged. You hear the man cock the pistol. Then the door opens, and it's hard to tell, but it looks like Matt stands up, and then there's a shot. Matt runs behind the car and stops for a second.

I think that's a good time to take a break. After, we'll hear just how Matt survived.

Segment 2

Jakob Lewis Hey, Jakob here. So right before the break, Matt was shot in the chest.

Matt Lovell So, I was holding my chest, which is where the bullet had gone in, but somehow had my full lung strength and a ton of adrenaline coursing through my body.

Jakob Lewis He gets up and starts running for the bar he had just left.

Matt Lovell I knew that it was up to me. At that moment, I just had to get to help, and that adrenaline, or angels or whatever you want to call it, whatever forces were at play got me to Red Door.

Jakob Lewis What happened next was a surreal scene on the front steps of a bar. A series of coincidences aligned to save Matt's life.

Patrick Brown Like I said, I had just gone done, that day I had got done with a clinical at Lavergne Fire Department working with their EMS crew.

Jakob Lewis This is Patrick Brown. At the time he worked at the Red Door, the bar where Matt ran back to.

Patrick Brown I was just the door guy, like I was the ID checker. You know, check the IDs, help pick up cups, you know, ask people to leave. It was just a night job that I could work while I went to school.

Jakob Lewis Patrick was taking classes to be an EMT. He wanted to be a first responder, ride in an ambulance, or be a firefighter. And listen to this next part carefully: He took his final class to be certified that morning. That was the first coincidence.

Patrick Brown And I remember getting ready for work that night. And like I had my EMT bag in my car.

Jakob Lewis This was the second. Patrick always left this at home, he had just forgotten about it. When he realized that it was in his car he thought about going back home, but he had already left for work and was a ways down the road, which is the third coincidence.

Patrick Brown I even showed up to work an hour early. Usually I wouldn't even be there, so it was, like, real serendipitous that, you know, that I was even there. Because I went into work an hour early, I brought my bag with me.

So I'm there, and about 10, 20 minutes of me being there, some people run over to get me and they're like, this guy's been shot. And so I go over to where he's at and he's

laying on the ground, and we can see a hole in his shirt where he's bleeding. I sprinted to the car and got my bag and then ran right back to his side and I hooked him up to a portable heart monitor.

Jakob Lewis Patrick's very fresh training went into effect. This was trial by fire for him, his very first time responding. As he went through his initial assessment of Matt he noticed his stomach was raised and hard. This probably meant liver damage.

Patrick Brown So his was, like I said, I could tell it was filling up with blood.

Jakob Lewis Someone called 911, and they kept Matt calm as they could until the ambulance arrived. Patrick said the EMTs accepted his report no questions asked. He had helped save Matt's life and watched as he was crash carted into the back of the emergency vehicle.

Matt Lovell And from there I was just kind of carried all the way to the emergency room and beyond.

Jakob Lewis While in the ambulance, Matt kept asking if he was going to make it. No one gave him a straight answer, just we're going to try our best. Matt didn't have his cell phone, and he kept shouting out his mother's phone number.

Matt Lovell That was one of the scariest things is potentially leaving this life without your mother. That's all I'll say.

Jakob Lewis And at some point in the journey, he started going in and out of consciousness.

Matt Lovell Everytime I would do that, they would say, "Hey hey hey, what's your name? What's your name, what's your name?" And try to bring me back because I probably wasn't going to sleep, there was a good chance I wouldn't make it if I drifted off. And so I would just reply Matt, my name is Matt and this happened 6 or 8 times and I finally started saying "My name is Matt Lovell," and then I started saying "My name is Matt Lovell and I'm going to live, my name is Matt Lovell and I'm going to live". I just kept chanting it, every 15 or 20 seconds they started kind of cheering me on. My name is Matt Lovell and I'm going to live, my mother is Dee Lovell, her number is 615, dot dot dot dot.

Jakob Lewis Just days before the shooting, Matt's mom knew he was having a hard week and wanted to get him something to cheer him up.

Matt Lovell Two days before the shooting she had gone to Marshall's. The price tag was on it it was 7.99. And she gave me one of those cheesy pinteresty kind of plaques that said "don't put off your happy life," and I remember looking at it thinking that's so cheesy. But now I keep it on my bedside table, and it's totally not my taste and I'm very

particular, but I keep it there, because it was almost like a tombstone for Sad Matt. Don't put off your happy life.

Jakob Lewis Lying in the ambulance surrounded by people doing everything they can to try and save his life, Matt said, he had a moment, he needed some kind of peace. Some kind of understanding of if he was okay or not. So he said came to this moment where just kind of prayed.

Matt Lovell I said, God you know I love you. I think I might have fucked a few things up in my life, and I'm not sure if I have or not, but I said, you know my heart is good and I said if i see you tonight I hope that all is well between us, and that's when I felt an immediate, it was like, almost like fire. Just came over me. And then it was peace, a sense of peace with myself and with whatever is out there, no matter what the outcome, whether I had lived or died that evening.

Jakob Lewis Matt was rushed into the ER for what he says was a surgery that took eight hours. They removed the bullet, they massaged his liver forever to get it to stop bleeding. And then...he woke up.

Matt Lovell It felt kind of like waking up on your friend's couch, and you're like, "Where am I?" for a second. And then I was like, oh my god I'm in the -- oh my god I lived!

And then I heard the beeps of the machinery. I immediately began sort of almost forcefully requesting that they bring my family in, because I just wanted to see them.

But I'm glad they didn't bring them in quickly, because I had a moment where I remember that peace that i had felt, It felt like a thousand acres of my heart had been cleared of anything negative.

It was like a vacuum had been opened. I think all the flaky paint, all the shame -- when I woke up, that space was so free. I remember I could feel it in my body. Like I could breathe more freely, and this was after like I had been cut open,

Jakob Lewis And then his family came in.

Matt Lovell And that was the most euphoric moment of my life. It was amazing. We cried and cried and cried and cried and cried. And my first words were I thought I never was going to see you again. I actually cracked a couple jokes to let them know I really was okay, and it was amazing.

Jakob Lewis Three months later, Matt would be sitting in the bathtub, reflecting on what had happened. Sitting there in the water he wrote a song, no guitar, just singing out into the bathroom. He played it for me in his living room.

Matt Lovell (singing) I am only sunlight, and I'm looking for a silver light to shine with me, and all the struggles that I've had are only bridges making shadows of my golden beams. I am only sunlight.

Jakob Lewis So, if you're thinking to yourself, this just sounds too good to be true, you're right. Matt got shot. That's a big deal, with a big affect and you can't just put a bow on matt's new found sense of who he is. While it did change him, the positive feelings didn't last forever.

Matt Lovell I think so much time had gone by, like it was five or six months, and I was so happy and and better than ever, healthier than ever in every way, I honestly thought I was going to get a free pass on the trauma part.

Jakob Lewis Next time, the recovery process is a mixed bag full of joy, hope, and and a whole lot of problems. Next on Matt Got Shot, Part 2.

Neighbors is from Nashville Public Radio and produced by me, Jakob Lewis. To see a video of Matt's song "Sunlight" as well as more links to his music, visit neighborspodcast.com. If you like the show, I have a couple of requests. The first: talk about it. To anyone, your friends, both online and in real life and I stress the latter one. Also, go to Apple Podcasts and leave a rating or review. Maybe you are listening right now on Apple Podcasts, it's just simple click away. Leave a review.

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Neighbors is a member of the podcast collective The Heard, producers involved include Vanessa Lowe, Jonathan Hirsh, Marlo Mack, Rob McGinley Meyers, Sara Brooke Curtis, and the astounding Erica Heilman. You can find out more at theheardradio.com, that's h-e-a-r-d. As always I am Jakob Lewis and I am reminding you to get to know your neighbors.