

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANI MCLAUGHLIN

BARBARA TABACH

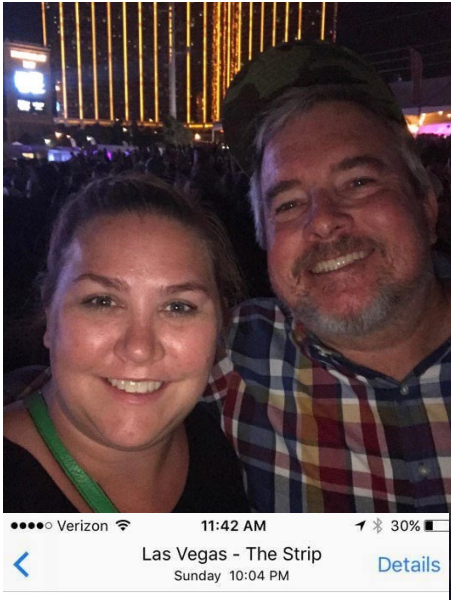
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REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV LIBRARIES

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## PREFACE



Dani McLaughlin and her husband Brian attend the Route 91 Harvest Festival annually. She describes the 2017 festival as a stay-cation. The couple had booked a room in Mandalay Bay; she is an MGM Resorts employee. Their room was several floors below the shooter.

At 10:04 PM, they posed with their festival friends for selfies. At 10:05 PM, they heard the sound of “fireworks” punctured the air. Within moments, one of their group was shot in the leg but was able to run, and their friends all scattered to find safety.

Dani and Brian were among the throngs who sought refuge at the airport. Dani is an MGM employee and her office is at the Atlantic terminal, near Koval and Tropicana. She describes the three minute dash to the hangar and her observations of those running there, and how authorities rushed in to secure the building and surrounding area.



Perhaps, as self-protection, she thrust herself into her work and avoided interacting with others. She witnessed about 400 people in the Atlantic terminal and how “people handle things differently” – even she and her husband were handling this horror differently from each other.

Around 3:00 AM, she and Brian went home, unable to retrieve their belongings from Mandalay until later that afternoon. Restless and unable to sleep, Dani returned to work that same morning. Police were still present.

Before this oral history, Dani had chosen not to talk about her experiences. Her rabbi urged her to participate. She explores her feelings about attending future concerts and about guns. *People don't need automatic weapons, it's for the military*, she says.

To her surprise and dismay, Dani and Brian's two elementary school age children would learn about the shooting through an announcement at their school. She talks about the impact this has had on one of children in particular has been memorable. This episode reminds her of being a child during the 1994

Northridge earthquake and the devastation that two friends escaped. Soon afterwards her family moved to Las Vegas.

She also reflects on the Las Vegas community's reaction, the candlelight vigil she attended at her synagogue, and other efforts that united the city. She also speaks of a wariness at this time about public reports of the event.

BELOW: Dani shared the irony of this texted message sent by Brian to her on October 4, 2014, while attending the first Route 91 Harvest Festival.



**Happy Valentine's Day.**

Thank you. You, too.

**Today is February 14th, 2018. This is Barbara Tabach and I am sitting with Dani McLaughlin.**

**Dani, would you spell your name for us, please?**

D-A-N-I and then M-C-L-A-U-G-H-L-I-N.

**You explained to me that you attended the Route 91. Had you gone before?**

Yes, we go every year.

**So you're a big country music fan, obviously.**

Well, our anniversary for our wedding is September 26th, so it's our anniversary getaway, so you say.

**In town vacation.**

Yes, in town, our staycation.

**That's great. For the October 1 project, obviously we want to know what you remember of how it all transpired. Let's start with that part of your story. Tell me about where you were and what you recall.**

Stage-wise we were on the right side looking at the stage on the grass, so we were right in the middle of everything. We always usually stand there. Even if we have a VIP passes to go in the VIP area, we usually just go and stay in the middle. We like being there. We were with six other couples and we were just having fun.

The original shots that happened, everyone had said it sounded like fireworks, and it really, truly did sound like fireworks. My husband even made a comment, "Oh, I should've brought my fireworks, ha, ha, ha." I'm like, "Yeah, that's funny—not." Then everything else

started happening. Actually one of the people we were with did get shot in the leg. He's okay, but he got shot in the leg.

**Wow. Did you know quickly that it was...?**

We kind of heard shots and then we all kind of all went to the ground. We didn't know he was shot right away until we got back up to start moving towards the exits. But then shooting started happening again. So that's when we realized he was shot, but we all got down on the ground. He said he was okay, so we kind of all stayed down where we were. And then the break, we tried moving again, but then it just happened quickly.

Then couple by couple, they started taking off. So it was one of our really good friends, they took off first and they went towards the exit on Las Vegas Boulevard. Then it was just the six of us. Then a break in the shots again and then another two took off. Then we were left with the ones that were shot. Actually, we ran—we didn't get out—we ran behind a bar that was right in the middle there and we hid there for a while. I just remember people were coming by and saying, "You're good; you're good; you can leave." We're like, "We're not leaving. You're going to get shot in the head and I'm going to watch you get shot in the head." But we just hung there until we knew it was no more shooting happening and then we took off towards the church, so we went out the other way. Actually my office is right around there, so we actually ran to my office.

**Of the couples that ended up, there's just four of you together that stayed in place.**

Yes. We all hid behind the bar.

**Did you have a sense at how long you...?**

It really honestly felt like a really long time, but I know it wasn't because we literally took a picture two minutes before the shooting started of all of us. We did a selfie group picture and

then it was like, *that was weird*, because on your phone it says; it said 10:04 and the shooting, I think, started at 10:06.

**Yes. The person who was injured, you said he was shot in the leg?**

Yes.

**How did you all handle that or how did he handle that?**

I think we were all in shock. I was trying to figure out what we needed to do. My husband was trying to figure out how we needed to get out. We were all thinking different things. He was trying to figure out how to not bleed and his wife was just freaking out. But we kind of told them that we would go get help and let them know that you were sitting here. So they stayed and we ran out.

At that point the shooting was done, so the SWAT guys were starting to roll in. They had their SUVs with the doors open and the guns loaded behind it. They were coming in as we were running out.

**Coming into the event.**

The festival grounds, yes.

**The person, where were they shot in their leg?**

Thigh.

**Not to be too graphic, but were they bleeding profusely?**

No, not bleeding profusely because he was wearing jeans, but you could tell. At that point you knew that he was shot. You could see the blood coming through. They still haven't actually decided if it was shrapnel or if he actually was fully shot.

**How did he get medical attention?**

They came and helped him once it was clear. They were able to come in and help him out.

**Did you stay with him?**

No, we went out. As we were running out, because we went, I guess, to Reno and then Koval at that point, we saw all the other people that were shot that got out. So there was blood all over the cement, on the floor, people laying in the floor, people in beds of trucks over there. It was crazy. But then we also saw people running towards the airport, which was interesting.

**Talk about that because you work for Atlantic Terminal?**

I work at Atlantic, but I work for MGM.

**Oh, okay.**

Yes, so I work for MGM Resorts. Our airport hangar is right there on Koval and basically Tropicana, which is attached to Atlantic. People were running and they were trying to get safe, so they ran through fences, they ran over fences, they ran into buildings, they broke into buildings, and a lot of people breached the airport at that point and were running across the runway and down the runway. Atlantic [Terminal] actually housed about four hundred people. Then some people tried coming into our office. Actually, someone we know that was at the concert—we weren't with them, but we knew that they were there—did that and came to our office and he was able to get in because he works for the company. We stayed for a long time in my office.

**What did you observe about others?**

People handle things differently. That was the one thing that was shocking. I don't handle it like everyone else. I wasn't crying. I wasn't freaking out. My husband was crying. Then he was freaking out. Now he still doesn't like talking about it or anything. I was doing work. Actually once I got back to my office, I had to stay busy. I couldn't think about it at that point. So I was really sitting at my desk doing work at like two in the morning.

**Interesting. Pure adrenaline?**

Yes, I think it was. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to have to worry what was going to happen next. I didn't want to think that I was actually in a shooting. I still think it hasn't officially hit me.

**Did it help to talk about it soon after or not, do you think?**

Yes, but...It was fine for me to talk about it, but I didn't like talking about it.

**Can you explain that to me a little bit?**

I didn't want to have to bring it back up. I always thought that if I talked about it, then it would come and get my emotions, and so I just did not—or I just did a little bit. Whatever people needed, I gave them that and that was it.

**Did you or your husband or any in your circle of friends that were together seek professional counsel?**

Yes, everyone but me did.

**Oh, interesting.**

My husband went to our cantor; he spoke with her a few times. Other friends went to different therapists and talked with them. One of my friends that we were with that we always go with, they now go to church all the time because of this. So it kind of made it more spiritual, I guess, for them.

**Did your circle of friends get together and try to talk through this together? How did you find out—**

Not really.

**—how everyone was handling it?**

I just know. Facebook, I guess. It's probably Facebook. I actually had a lot of friends that were



there. We didn't necessarily see all of them there.

**It's interesting, people have talked about the social media presence or imprint of the event and all of that. Did you personally post on the Internet?**

I didn't. There was one picture I posted, but that was only because it was already going to be posted anyway and it was the one right before—I was like this—"the last picture we took of the night" kind of thing. But other people that I know were there have posted things, and I'm like, *oh, that's where I was*. Or there's a video that was posted and actually you can see where we are in the video. It's during the shooting and someone was just videoing, like hiding but videoing. I see ourselves in it, so that's weird.

**Oh, my. Have you joined any of the private Facebook sites?**

I haven't done any of that.

**You haven't gotten together with any of those groups, okay.**

No.

**But you've got your own large group, it sounds like.**

Yes, I do.

**When you reflect on that if you can, being with a large group of friends, was that helpful maybe?**

Yes, I think so because a lot of us were in different places. The ones I wasn't with were in different places during it and it was interesting to see what they saw, what they experienced as it was happening, because they were seeing a different angle, I guess, of the shooting. Some people in their area wasn't shot, but they still heard the shots, or some people were very close to a lot of people getting killed. It's just interesting.

**Take me to getting into the terminal. How long a walk or run?**

It's probably three minutes from the festival grounds to my office. It's just maybe a block down from where the church is, so I'm right there. I drive by it all the time, which is also hard. It's interesting, I try not to look. When it was closed off, I really didn't look. But now I just drive. I don't look and see what's happening or see if I can see anything.

**Because you were an employee of MGM, did they do anything specific for employees?**

No. Well, I guess they had counseling, but I didn't talk to anyone.

**But they did make that available.**

Yes.

**I heard from a volunteer counselor that they tried, but sometimes you know the access to it.**

**This four hundred people that were approximately in the terminal, can you describe that scene to me?**

I didn't actually see the whole thing, but I know my office is first. If you were coming from that area, you would hit my office and then Atlantic. The amount of people that were walking by my office, because I have cameras all around, it was amazing. I wanted to let everyone in that I could because I know my office is secure, but, at the same time, at that time you didn't know where the shots are coming from and you didn't know how many shooters there were. Any one of them could have potentially been a shooter at that moment, so we just let them walk by our office.

People that climbed fences that got hurt or people running and got trampled and stuff, you could see that they got hurt and there were boots in our parking lot and clothes and dresses and shoes and all kinds of things that were left randomly as people were running that way. It was eye-opening.

**Did the authorities come on to your property?**

They did. They rushed our office, guns blazed. It happened before we got into the building. But the girl that was there, she had to put her hands up and show that no one was in any—she had to open all the doors, let them search everything in our office. And then they were like, "How do you get up to the roof?" Because obviously the roof was probably a good access point. She's like, "You can't unless you're in the hangar, which is secure." So they were like, "Okay."

**So they kind of swept that area and then they let everybody just stay there that was—**

Yes. Then for a long time there were police out front of our office. I don't think we left the building until three or four in the morning. Actually, because we do a staycation, we had a room at Mandalay, so we couldn't go back to our hotel room with all of our stuff in it. We actually chose to go home, get a few hours of sleep, which we didn't sleep because people were calling and messaging and making sure we were okay and we still had adrenaline going. So we didn't sleep. I actually went to work the next day—or that day. I went back into the office because I wasn't going to sit at home.

**By the time you went back in, what time would you say?**

Nine.

**Nine in the morning, oh boy. You are just—**

I am, yes.

**—pure energy.**

It's bad, yes.

**By then the police are gone.**

There were still some police. The street was still closed after my office. It was probably a half of a block; just past my office they had the street closed down at that point. Then the perimeter kind of got further back. Then for a long time they had all of the church area closed.

**You were able to access your office okay.**

Yes.

**When were you able to get back into your room at Mandalay?**

The next day later in the day, probably around two, but that was only because they had cleared our floor, so we were able to.

**You were on what floor?**

We were fifteen.

**So you were several floors—lots of floors below.**

Yes.

**What was it like to walk into Mandalay that—**

I didn't go. My husband went. I have gone since only a few times and it's weird. Actually, a few of my friends that were there work for Mandalay and they work in convention sales and it's hard for them to even sell those suites, not necessarily on that floor, but just that suite because it's basically the picture that's all over the news of what the room looks like but without the bullets and the guns. They're having a hard time with that right now. I think they're probably going to end up redoing all the rooms. That would be my guess.

**You've gone to Route 91 since the first year it happened.**

Yes.

**What is the future of that festival, do you think?**

I don't know.

**As a fan what would you say to them?**

A part of me would say I would go back because I would. It's fun. We had a blast. Now they know what to do differently. But a part of me would be nervous that if it were on the Strip again

that it could happen again. I would constantly be looking around to see if you see anything that maybe would catch your eye. I don't know if they could do it indoors, I guess. It would be different, but it would be a different atmosphere, also. So I don't know.

**How do you recreate that experience and feel safe at the same time?**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Have you gone to concerts or events since?**

We have not. We are going to, but we have not yet, not because we're scared, because we just haven't had one that we've wanted to go to.

**What are you going to next?**

Bruno Mars. We're going on Monday.

**I'd love to see Bruno Mars.**

I know. We've been wanting to for a while.

**When you go into that venue—I know it's an indoor venue—do you think people who were at the festival will still be observant of their surroundings?**

Yes. Oh, yes, I think we will be for sure. I'll definitely be looking around more and making sure I can get out easily if I needed to and all that. Yes, it will be interesting.

**Your feelings about guns and gun rules and laws, has that been modified or how has it changed since that event?**

I've never, ever, ever shot a gun ever in my life, so I probably won't now. Well, maybe I will. I don't know. I haven't thought about it really to be honest. But I definitely don't think that people need automatic weapons. That's something the military and the police need. We don't as regular civilians need those. There's no point in having them. I haven't really thought about it.

**The demographic of the people that attend a country western festival like that, you have a**

**lot of off-duty first responders and—**

Right. Yes, you do.

**—former or current military.**

And there were a lot of military people there in uniform.

**Did they behave differently than others?**

Oh, yes. They were laid-back and they were definitely not drinking. They were having fun, but they were still being professional in their uniforms. So, yes.

**There's talk that they might relocate the festival at the other end of the Strip. Do you think that that will make a difference, or how might that make a difference?**

The nice thing about where it is, is that you can walk. I can park at one of the hotels and walk. Down at the other end, it's not going to be as easy. People are going to be doing Ubering and it will probably be harder to get everybody in that they want to get in. I know a lot of people did hotel rooms and then did it that way to make it easy. I don't know. It would be interesting over there.

**How would you describe the effect of the event on you? Do you feel like you've changed in any particular way?**

Yes. Yes and no. I do listen to country, but I don't listen to it as often. I definitely don't listen to Jason Aldean, who was the one performing. I have not listened to his—anytime one of his songs comes on, I'll turn it off. I don't know if it's a conscious thing. I couldn't even tell you what song was playing during the shooting. I have no idea. But it's just I won't do it.

I want to do everything with my kids now, like Bruno Mars. I'm like, "Let's bring them. It will be fun for them." But they obviously can't come with me, but now I want more time with them just in case. You never know.

**Well, they're precious.**

Yes.

**How old are your kids?**

Six and seven.

**Were they aware of what was going on with you and your husband?**

The school announced it that morning, the Monday morning.

**Announced it?**

Yes, they announced to all the children at the school that there was something that happened the night before at the concert. My kids knew we were at that concert and that's when they all found out.

**What did you think about that?**

I was actually in shock because we were going to tell them, but not tell them everything that they had heard. Then, of course, other kids knew based on hearing from their parents talking about it that there was something that happened and so they thought that it was worse than it was, I think. Now one of mine is obsessed with the shooter and how many shooters there were and if we go places, will there be a shooter.

**The impact on the kids...I had not heard that somebody announced it at the schools. I don't know what I think about that.**

I know. I was surprised. I was surprised that they did. I don't think that they needed to.

**Did you discuss that with the administration?**

No, I didn't. But I did talk to one of my kids' teachers later and I said, "I was surprised that it was brought up." And she was like, "Well, why?" And I said, "Well, I was there." And she was like, "You were there?" I don't think they realize that parents would be going. I don't know. Maybe it

was just my kids' school. It's a public school, but I assumed all of the public schools would have done it.

**That gives me pause.**

I know, yes.

**It really does, especially with such young children.**

Both of mine are in elementary.

**How did you feel about how the community reacted?**

Oh, it was amazing.

**Can you describe what you felt from that?**

Just at Congregation Ner Tamid, it was amazing. We did that candlelight vigil the first night and then there was the concert and there were multiple other things that had happened. I know a few churches did a whole bunch of different events and hockey has been amazing for what happened. Even the basketball at UNLV, the floor has it all over it. It's been great.

**I see that you feel proud about how the community came together.**

Very proud, yes.

**Did you go to the memorial that was built across from the Mandalay?**

I have not been to the memorial, no.

**They've moved that now.**

No.

**How did you feel about the media coverage, the highlighting of people who were in attendance at the concert and all of that?**

I tried not to watch as much as I can because I knew that what they were covering wasn't necessarily the whole truth. I was waiting for answers, not necessarily what they think is going to



happen or what happened. So I tried not to watch as much as I probably should have.

**Answers, that's interesting, you wanted answers.**

Yes.

**Do you felt like you've gotten them?**

Some.

**What kind of answers have satisfied you to any degree?**

Well, maybe not that many then. I still don't know...I feel that something happened with that Jose Campos guy and the time line of that whole thing; I still think that it's different than what they're saying.

**That's the employee from the hotel.**

Yes.

**He was shot, right?**

Yes, in the leg and all that. Then I still heard that there might have been another shooter and that maybe could have happened. I don't know.

**So you're bothered by that.**

Just based on where we were hiding at the bar and how the bullets were flying over us, I don't know, it seems weird that the angle from the hotel would have been that way. I don't know, but maybe. Like I said, I've never shot a gun, so I don't know for sure.

**It's a long ways away.**

Yes. And the hotel is here and we were behind it here and they were going across us. I don't know.

**I can't imagine. Do you think we'll ever know, what was the motivation?**

I don't think so, not in this town. If it were another town, they probably would have said.

**It just was so huge that it's hard to get your arms around it.**

I know, yes.

**Any other aspects of this that we haven't talked about that you reflect upon as time has gone on?**

I don't think so. Facebook, even just saying we were safe, just one post, and everyone knew. You can just put, "I'm safe," and people knew that we were.

**What's your background? Are you from Las Vegas? You were born here?**

No. California, Northridge where the earthquake was. We moved after the earthquake.

**What's your memory of the earthquake?**

Actually, me and my sister both had friends over that night and the friends that we had over, had they been at their own house, they would have been crushed with something that fell on them. I just remember having the earthquake. My brother was sleeping. He slept through the whole thing. He didn't wake up. Then after it happened we got all of our stuff out of freezer because it was done and did like a barbeque and made food and ate our melted ice cream in the street with all of our neighbors. That's all I really remember of it.

**Do you remember being traumatized or did you feel traumatized by it?**

No, but I know I was.

**How old were you?**

I was ten.

**Just a little older than your own children.**

Yes, yes.

**Which is a lot in lifespan; between ten and seven is big. Interesting.**

Yes. But even now when I go to California—actually even here in Vegas—I don't park in

garages. I will not. Fashion Show Mall, I won't go under. I don't know if it's just because the parking garages collapsed. Just in case. You never know.

**As a parent how do you not transfer some of those fears to your kids?**

I know. I try not to. I try not to make it obvious.

**I was going to say that's a rhetorical question.**

I try not to make it where they know.

**It's a tough situation. Las Vegas as a home, this didn't change your feeling about—**

No, no. We'd still live here.

**You learned about this project through Rabbi Akselrad.**

Yes.

**I appreciate him suggesting that we get together.**

Yes, it's great.

**Anything else that you want to share with me?**

I don't think so. I don't know. Unless you have any more questions.

**No. You really did a good job describing this. You said your husband doesn't want to participate, which I respect.**

I'll ask him again, but he doesn't like talking about it as much as I do. He's more sensitive. He's the sensitive one of the two of us, and I give him a hard time about it and I shouldn't.

**I appreciate your time.**

Thank you.

**This is quite helpful.**

Good.

**Thank you, Dani.**

I appreciate it. I can send you pictures, too.

**You have pictures?**

I have where we were in comparison to everything.

**That would be great. I would put that with this interview. That's perfect. If you have friends who might participate...**

Yes, I'll ask.

**We are, like I say, interviewing all types of people.**

I have a friend who had her daughter there that was four, so I can ask her if she wants to come and speak to you.

**The child aspect is fascinating and the destinations that people sought safety at.**

Exactly.

**You had a whole new perspective about the terminal just holding people there. When did the people actually leave the terminal?**

I don't even know really. I'm sure until they knew it was safe.

**Thought that it was good to go. It's just amazing. These little pieces all help put the picture together. Thank you so much.**

When it happened I sent my mom a text saying, "We are safe." She just dismissed it and said, "Okay." The year prior a few of our friends got in a fight during Route 91, so she knew that and she told us not to get in a fight this year. She assumed "we are safe" meant we didn't fight, until she saw the news about an hour later.

**Then did she call you?**

Yes, then she called and was panicked and the whole thing. But, yes, that was actually funny.

**You were just showing me that one photo. Was that last year's photo?**

It was 2014. I think that was probably the first year.

**And your husband's text. What was his text message?**

"Not a bad way to celebrate our anniversary," or something like that.

**[End of recorded interview]**