

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA GRUBER

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REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV LIBRARIES

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVE

Today is March second, 2019. This is Barbara Tabach and I'm with Christina Gruber in her home in Las Vegas, Nevada. We're going to be talking for the Remembering One October project.

Christina, how do we spell your name?

C-H-R-I-S-T-I-N-A.

And your last name?

Gruber, G-R-U-B-E-R.

Great. Explain to me how you came to live in Las Vegas. Let's start there.

It was 1997. I was twenty years old. I took a semester off of college and one of my friends was moving out here and I kind of jumped on the bandwagon and moved out here with her.

And you were moving from?

New Jersey. Yes. I was an only child and my parents wanted to kill me, but they ended up coming out, too, so all ended well.

What kind of work do you do?

I'm a CPA. I graduated from UNLV in 2000 and I got my CPA license in 2002 and I've been in the field since.

Great. You're really settled into the city and you've seen it change a lot since you've been here.

It has; it's grown tremendously. A lot of the houses that we're seeing out in Summerlin weren't there. I remember going out to the desert and all this not being here back then.

Now, your parents moved out here to join you?

Yes.

They live nearby?

They do. They live about ten minutes away, which is great for the grandchildren.

That's great. Good. Let's talk about the One October, the Route 91 Festival. Have you always gone? What's your relationship with country music?

I started liking country music—well, my parents actually listened to country music, the old-school country music as I was growing up, but I never took a liking to it. And then about fifteen years ago through friends I began to like country music, and I was more into the modern, but now I like all of it.

It had been my second year attending the festival. We had gone—there was probably about twenty to forty of us that I knew at any given point in time that were at the festival, and so it was a big party with friends and it was just the event that we looked forward to the entire year. It was just so exciting.

You had mentioned to me that you have done speaking about your attending the festival and your injuries. I'm curious -- when you're gathering your thoughts about your experiences to do speaking for purpose, what did you go through? How did you address that?

Well, the speaking situations I got invited to do related a lot to how I recovered from the event and used triathlon in order to push myself past it as a healing mechanism, basically. I had to go through the event itself, but then I had to go through the healing process, which was really important because it shares with others that maybe have been through something similar or not similar, but some form of tragic event whether it's divorce or a death in the family or anything really that might have been hard for them at the time. It's a story of overcoming these challenges and really moving forward and becoming a better self or a better version that you were before that happened.

Where were you when the shots started being fired?

We were about, let's say, a quarter block from the stage, perhaps, a quarter block to a half a block from the stage. We were pretty close up there. We were towards the middle; there was a catwalk that the performers would come out on.

Initially Jason Aldean had initially come on. He had gone through a series of songs. That was one of the main reasons I was at the concert, because I absolutely love Jason Aldean. When we first heard what were gunshots, he was just beginning one of his songs and some friends and I, we had looked in the sky and we thought maybe they were fireworks, but obviously there wasn't anything going on. We just thought something had failed from a pyrotechnic standpoint or whatnot.

Well, when we heard them again, we started seeing people running towards us saying that we were being shot. It was very surreal. So we turned around and we started running as well. I just remember there being so many rounds of gunfire, what it sounded like that night. It sounded like it was coming from all directions. We were down on the ground. We didn't know where they were coming from. I'm not experienced in that kind of warfare or whatnot.

I ended up losing my friends and ended up at the church down the street where I had realized I had been hit while I was running. I looked down. It was just like a popping feeling. I looked down at my legs and saw blood coming down and that kind of prompted me to run faster. Through my head that entire time, I was just wanting to get home to my kids. Like I said, I ended up at the church and a couple from California, the man performed triage. He used the belt off of his pants and created a tourniquet on my leg.

I had been on the phone with one of my best friends who actually has the other half of this ring. She had just left with her twelve-year-old daughter whom I've coached before, so I was

very close with her. They ended up—they were at the Four Seasons when the gunfire began, so I am thankful that they weren't there at the time. She had actually called me because we have location services on one another on our phones and she knew what was going on and she was trying to figure out if I was okay. I just wanted them to assure that my kids were okay because I didn't know what was going on. Was the whole city under attack? What was happening really?

The man piggybacked me to the main street where I got into a stranger's car with other victims. I remember there was a man in the front seat; his name is Bruce and he had been shot in the foot. I was at that point just panicking. He just held my hand and tried to keep me calm. Mary and her husband, from California, they had taken my phone and one of my boots; they had taken my boot off in order to get the tourniquet on my leg, so I didn't have my phone at the hospital. But she was taking phone calls from everybody calling from all over the country, letting them know I had been hit and that I was on my way to the hospital. Of course, I called the only number I could remember at the time was my children's dad and I let him know what was going on, and he contacted my best friends and my best friend's husband came down to the hospital immediately. He also contacted my roommate at the time who was in touch with other friends who were at the concert with me that had already left.

One of my other girlfriends, Velocity, she came down and stayed with me the entire night. My roommate, Courtney, stayed with me the entire time at the hospital. I was at Desert Springs.

I just remember being transported to another hospital alongside another girl that had tried to jump a fence and had a fencepost through her calf. I actually remember holding her hand and then seeing another man who had been shot in the groin area, blood. There was just pandemonium going on in the hospital, but it was controlled chaos, almost, unlike at the festival

grounds when it was complete chaos; people were screaming, running. I see people dropping from the side of my peripheral vision.

Yes, so I ended up at the next hospital. It is there where my ex-husband had brought my parents to the hospital and I saw them. I just let them know that I was okay.

I had gotten X rays—I'm going further into this story—I had gotten X rays and found out that I had a piece of bullet, a shrapnel, in my leg, but I was okay. They treated it. They didn't remove it; it's still in my leg. Obviously I was concerned about running again. I had just finished my first season of triathlon. I had a race, a hundred-mile bike ride, next week after. I'm asking the nurses—

This is what you think about it.

This is what I was thinking, *I know I'm not losing my leg, okay, so can I do this race next week?* They just looked at me like I had ten heads. That was a big fear of mine, will I be able to run again? After I knew I was going to be okay.

I got home that morning and my kids came over and we embraced. They didn't really talk much about it. We didn't really talk much about any of it until the Parkland incident occurred where I had to basically talk to them about being aware. The hardest conversation to have is about forgiveness of people that might have done these kind of things. My daughter is fourteen. She just had a lockdown a month ago.

At her school, huh?

Yes, yes. I remember her texting me. I, of course, went into panic mode, but I quickly found out from friends that the situation was outside the school, so I calmed down quickly and I actually texted her to let her know she was safe.

You have just the daughter?

And my son, who is eight. I contacted the schools. I did the things that parents do; contact the school. Make sure counselors are talking to them, looking for any signs of anything that could possibly be going on. It's all over the news. My parents, they watch news all the time and I have to tell them, "Don't watch the news right now while the kids are there."

That week, when I first got home, I had visitors constantly. I attended church. I went to a doctor, an orthopedic surgeon. I was worried about performing again as an athlete. I found out I actually have twenty pieces of shrapnel in my leg. I'll show you an X ray picture. I believe a lot of them have come out, the ones that were surface level, but I do have a very large scar where the large piece entered my body that night.

I talked to my coach. I basically dedicated my entire season to the fifty-eight. My race bib for my first Ironman that I did in October was two-five-eight for my two kids and the fifty-eight kids. This bib that you see right here was actually given to me by accident three months later.

Just a coincidence?

Yes. It's four-five-eight. I just remember seeing that bib and just losing it, really, Two thousand eighteen was a really important season for me because every race I did—I did a race every season—every race, at that finish line—and even now, I actually got first place in running a half marathon in January.

Congratulations.

When I'm struggling and I'm trying to pull through, I just remember those that can't run and I just say, "Come on, give me wings." That's my thing, give me the wings. I actually have a tattoo that I got; it's Psalm 91. I don't know if you're familiar with it. I'm not sure how spiritual you want me to get, but...

Please. I'm not familiar with Psalm.

I had done reiki a lot prior to; I was dealing with my divorce that had happened three years ago, but it had finalized right before that. In each of my sessions, Archangel Michael was present in the room. Archangel Michael is the protector of all protectors. And so, my other friends that were there, a few days later we were visiting the crosses and we had gone to lunch.

I had gone back to work after four days. I couldn't sit home. I had to get back to reality. When, in actuality, I should not have gone back to work because my brain wouldn't work for two months.

But if you read Psalm 91, I wanted to get a Roman numeral, but I wanted something that had to do with Archangel Michael, and so I got Psalm 91 on it, Route 91, and the reason...I will read you...the reason I got it is because it was very relevant that evening because of the words, and when I read them you will see.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the most high will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. He will save you from the fowl or snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge. You will not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.”

That importance is, not only had I had Archangel Michael in my presence during my reiki, but the night before the shooting, my friends and I were walking on the Strip and a man was walking ahead of us with Archangel Michael on his T-shirt. I truly believe that I was close to being hit, but I perhaps caught the shrapnel from a bullet that ricocheted or hit someone next to me; I don't know. But I feel like I was protected somehow through wings.

When I say during my races, “Let’s go, guys, give me wings,” I try to race in their honor because they can’t be here, and use that to give me strength to really make me faster and make me finish stronger. Yes, it’s just been quite a journey, obviously of healing and trying to get back into things.

You’re very lucky, very lucky.

Yes. I feel like I am. But I still also feel really bad sometimes that these people that passed... They left families that love them and I feel guilty that I’m here still because... I don’t know. I think it’s just natural to feel that.

That survivor’s guilt, yes.

Yes, yes.

You said you were at Desert Springs Hospital and then you...

I got transported to Henderson, which is the newer hospital right next to Cowabunga. It’s crazy, for months I had no idea where this hospital was after that, no clue. Back in July I went to a pool party for my friend’s son at Cowabunga. For some reason, I wore this little flowered dress that I wore that night of the shooting. That’s the first time I had put it on. My roommate was still here at the time and she looks at me. She’s like, “I haven’t seen you wear that dress since that night.” I’m like, “I know. I felt like wearing it.” I’m literally driving to Cowabunga and I look to the left and that hospital is right next to it. It was really surreal.

I have a lot of these little instances. My son, he’s eight and I’m trying to get him to do triathlon, so he did a kid’s triathlon. His bib number was one-eight-five. If you read that backwards that’s fifty-eight. I have a lot of different little signs, I like to say, from the angels that show that it’s okay to move on.

You’re protected in some way, yes.

Yes, yes.

Being a parent—I've talked to other people about how their children learned about it.

Your kids learned about the shooting through...

From their dad.

That was much better than going to school and being surprised with that.

Yes, yes.

Did you have other friends there that were injured in other ways?

No, none of them were injured, thankfully. But nobody could reach me, so I made sure that as soon as I could get onto my friend's social media, I said, "I need to..." I had a hundred messages on my phone from people all over. I can't imagine what went on in people's heads when they were calling and getting a phone call answered by a stranger, and she didn't know where I was going. She just knew I had been shot and that I was going to the hospital.

She actually came by—they were from California. They came by to bring my boot and my phone the next day from the Strip. They're so sweet and I still keep in contact with them. I call them My Little Angels because they kept me calm during that time. I was just panicked.

I was so scared because I would have had my kids there and I would have been that mom, "No, we're not leaving. We've got to listen to Jason." How would I have protected them? How would I have protected them? I still have nightmares and it's always involving me trying to protect them. I think that was my biggest fear and the biggest thing that I still get really anxious about. I go to Universal Studios or hockey games with them and I'm on high alert when they're with me. It changes your way of thinking.

Yes. You talked a little bit about the speaking engagements that you've done, but how did that begin? How did you know you were ready to do that? When was the first one that you did?

I was flipping through *USA Triathlon* and they said, "Hey, if you have a story, share it with us." So I said, "Okay, well, here's my story. This happened. I'm dedicating my season. I'm doing my first Ironman in October and dedicating it to the angels." I don't know if it was the editor of *USA Triathlon* reached out to me and I ended up on the cover of *USA Triathlon*. I'll show you that. They did an article on me and they did a photo shoot at the Remembrance Walls.

Someone whose wife is a triathlete back east in Connecticut was flipping through the magazine that is affiliated with APA, he was asked to do another—he had done a set years ago with survivors of the Virginia Tech shooting and Columbine and a few others and he was asked to do something else. I was there alongside a Nave admiral that was present during the incident that occurred on a Navy ship as well. He reached out to me and asked if I would come speak about my healing and my road to recovery and what pushed me to heal and move forward, so I did. I took that leap of faith.

It was fun. It was in D.C. It was in August. I had flown out with one of my good friends. We were stuck in Indiana. I had to speak at eight a.m. It's four p.m. the next day and the flights were canceled. We ended up driving all night from—not Indiana—Chicago to D.C. I got there at five thirty in the morning and I had to be ready to speak at seven a.m. I had done all this planning for a few months prior to on my story and I ended up almost winging it. I think I was delirious from lack of sleep. It ended up really good.

A year ago my coach had asked me to speak to her group as well and I wasn't ready, but then I just did it three weeks ago and I said, "I'm ready to share my story." I'm ready to make

people aware that they can overcome things and give people some hope, I guess. That despite all the hate in the world that we can still move forward and help one another and love one another and do better, really.

You had the kindness of strangers helping you. You mentioned the guy Bruce that was shot in the foot. Do you know what happened with him?

I don't. We have a lot of survivor groups and I tried finding him, but I did not have any luck.

Are you a member of some survivor groups?

Yes, on Facebook.

How does that help?

It's very helpful because there are some dark days still and you wonder sometimes—because there's a lot of people that portray themselves as completely healed; they'll never talk about it; it's like it never happened; it was no big deal. Then you wonder when you're having a dark day, what's wrong with me that I'm still having that dark day? But it's helpful to see when other people have those days that you're not alone. I've gained so much country family from this experience. The people that I was there with that experienced that with me, they're my family. We get each other. When everybody else doesn't, I know I can pick up the phone and call them if I need that venting moment. So it's helpful.

That's good. Did you seek professional counseling?

I did. From October to December I barely knew what day it was. I woke up and I just went through the motions of getting up, going to work, trying to perform my job. I don't think I was even thinking clearly enough to perform my job. I was just still in this cloud of, what just happened here? Did it really happen?

I seeked (sic) out counseling. I never had nightmares until a few months ago when I started having nightmares again. I kind of sunk into a little bit of a funk, a little bit of a depression, and I started seeing one again. We've been working through that.

I think it's really important to ask for help because there are people that are there for you and people aren't alone even though you feel really alone. Most of my friends that weren't there, they don't have half a clue of what I went through. They just knew it was a tragic event. But the feeling that you had while you're there, it's hard to explain and it's hard to replicate that and have someone understand unless they've been through it.

How did you feel about the city of Las Vegas? You've lived here since 1997?

Yes. A few years before that I had a hard time connecting with this city in general. But October One really showed me a sense of community, really, how the city came together, how the Golden Knights, their inaugural season...I still get teary eyed watching Deryk Engelland give his speech when all the first responders were out on the ice. I don't know, it's just become more of a home now to me. This event that is unthinkable really gave me a new perspective of community from Las Vegas, yes.

Did you go the Knights game that night?

No. No, I didn't. I've been to several. I love watching them, amazing.

Even now, when they...

Oh, yes. I'm a huge hockey fan from when I was a little girl.

Perfect.

Yes. I used to go to the games with my dad all the time, so I was so excited when they came here.

Now, as a parent, with kids, what a challenge. How do you talk about that?

I don't really try to sugarcoat it with my kids. This is how I explained it that day. I don't remember how it came up. But my daughter sat there and she asked me, "Do you forgive the guy that shot you?" And I just sat there and I had to think about it because you have to be really careful. I tried to put into perspective that the person that is doing the harm to that level of hate is far more troubled than what we can imagine, right? Because they don't feel that love that we feel. I mean, it's inconceivable to think of doing that to another human being, right? But they are so far gone that they don't understand that. So what happens in their world that could have triggered this?

I told my kids, "Hey, you need to be very aware. But realize, what if there is someone bullying someone in school? Chances are they're being bullied maybe elsewhere and maybe they're taking out their frustrations on someone that's innocent. It's a lesson to learn. Do you forgive them? Yes. As hard as it is, I was taught as a child growing up to forgive and to always seek out the kindness in people." I told her, "You have to be aware. There's going to be something going on in someone's world and if you see something you need to tell someone. If something is not right, you need to tell someone because when someone is made aware of it, they can prevent something from happening, or maybe they can't, but at least you tried. You can't just sit there idly and watch things happening. You have to be proactive." That's how I explained it to them.

What an extraordinary situation for you and then the Parkland shooting at a high school and your daughter is not quite high school-age at that moment?

She's a freshman now. Yes.

And the awareness.

Yes. She's at a weird age. I didn't realize the impact it had until she had to write about the scariest day of her life. She had a couple of things and I gave her ideas and she ran with this one. She wrote about the fear that she had that day when her dad told her that they weren't sure if I was going to be okay. Through a child's eyes, I imagine it to be very scary, not knowing. I can't imagine what was going on in her head. I know that she was scared when they had that lockdown and they weren't telling her anything, so that's why I was very quick to tell her, "You're safe because I know you're not being told anything," because they like to hide all that stuff for their safety and their protection, right? I told her immediately, I said, "You're fine. It's outside the school. It has nothing to do with the school. They're just keeping you safe." Because the unknown...Not knowing that night that I didn't know what was going on, that's the worst feeling in the world. When you have that lack of control. I just try to teach them to be more aware of things.

I'm more aware. I remember before I spoke in front of the eight hundred people, I sat there and I counted every single exit sign. I said, "This is what I do when I go anywhere now." If I'm at a restaurant, I will not put my back to the door. I'm looking around. I'm looking at people, watching their reaction to things, how they're acting. It's just something that you do now, I guess.

I can't imagine that you wouldn't change in that way.

No, no.

Do you go to concerts again?

Yes. I was supposed to go to one last night, but I was sick. Yes, I actually saw Jason Aldean perform in October. It was for the anniversary. I drove to California. I had done a triathlon that

morning, drove to California to see him in Irvine, drove back after the concert, and did the Vegas Strong 5K the next day.

You are a determined woman.

Yes, I'm determined crazy. But it was awesome to see him. He was there. He was healing like the rest of us. To hear him perform that song and it to be okay, yes, it heals. Music has always healed me. It's always been such a part of my life, I can't see myself not going to a concert. Am I up on the stage anymore? No, I have to stand back away from the crowds. I'm very cautious about all of that. I go to the children's play yards for the birthday parties and I stay in the birthday room because it just gives me anxiety. I'm just a different person now and it stinks, honestly. Sometimes I mourn that person I was where I was so much more carefree. Everybody called me a dancing ferry at the concert because I just love dancing and music. I was so happy. It was just a happy-happy time and it was still one of the better times of my life, honestly. I was a very happy person then. They're talking about bringing it back and—

What do you think about that?

—I hope they do. I hope they do.

Good.

Because we deserve that.

Do you think it's okay it's at a different venue?

Yes. Yes. I think we deserve that healing opportunity and I hope he comes back, I really do.

He being Jason Aldean?

Yes, yes. I think it's so important for people to move forward because there are lots of people that haven't yet and you see it and it's sad. I mean, I get affected by it. But my one friend—I've

watched a grown man cry and it's not easy for most men to cry at the sound of a song. I really hope it comes back. I thought it was coming back this year, but I haven't heard anything.

I'm like you. I've heard that it is, but not exactly...

Yes, there's no set plans and, gosh, I really hope so. It will be the best. It was my happiest time.

You briefly mentioned the crosses that were set up at the Welcome to Las Vegas sign and then the Healing Gardens. The Healing Gardens is more permanent now.

Yes. It's a very special place. You can go there any given day and there's always a survivor there. You have Brother Drae who's been keeping the gardens. He's in a wheelchair half the time. But he's a sweetheart. I met him. Every time I go there I visit the trees. I try to study the faces of those that were lost. Someone could have taken a bullet for me. Who knows? If you look at the map—I think it was January when the police report came out—we were standing in one of the heaviest hit spots. Three people right in the middle of us, done. I mean, I truly—I don't know. I just think I was spared and I don't know which one of them took it for me, but I'm thankful. That's why I have him.

Him being Max, your doggie. He's a good dog.

He knows.

He knows to take care of you. Anything else that we should know?

No. I think I babbled.

No, no. You've been very articulate. I can imagine that it must be... We talked to one of the victims who survived—and this I did want to ask you—and he's an assistant hockey coach at UNLV.

They lost someone, yes? Did they lose someone?

No. He got shot, but I don't think they lost anyone.

Okay, maybe that's what I heard about.

He's reached out and tried to speak to others and use this experience. I remember asking him if he thought his athleticism helped him in his healing process. How would you respond to that?

I think my athleticism saved me that night, my ability to run. I'm a runner. I think the muscle in my legs prevented that shrapnel from hitting my femoral artery. It just missed my femoral artery. I think the mind of an athlete, a true athlete, it's mind over matter. It's more your thought process than how your body feels. I think that my ability maintain mentally strong helped me heal physically. Getting back to training, to doing what I do, it helped me heal. Those months that I couldn't train, I went nuts. Those were my hardest months. I turned to drinking. I think being the athlete that I am is what saves me, really, still to this day. It gives me something to have control over. When I'm training I have control over that. When I'm in the pool—I'm a horrible swimmer—but when I'm in the pool, I have control over that. When I'm racing I have control. That night I didn't have control and it's a way to take my control back.

That's a good statement, yes. We should all keep training.

Yes. I have my first triathlon in two weeks of the season in Havasu. It's freezing out.

What's your normal routine like?

Six days a week. Four a.m. I worked fifty hours a week, so it's either in the morning or at night, but my job is too draining on the brain. I can't function most days after work. I get up in the morning. I'm swimming, biking or running, sometimes both or two of the three. My weekends, I spend two to four hours Saturday or Sunday training. I haven't trained in three weeks because of this cold. It keeps me sane. I can't wait to get back into it again, honestly. I can't wait to race. I haven't trained the past three weeks, but in two weeks I'm racing. Come hell or high water, I'm

going to go for it. And I've got another Ironman in St. George in May. That's supposed to be hard, but whatever. I mean, you just get through it.

I admire that. I couldn't begin to do that. I try to work out on a regular basis, but nothing like that. That's a strong drive.

I learned how to swim two years ago. I was terrified of the open water. The first time I went to Lake Mead to swim, Nancy had to walk me off the ledge because I thought I was going to have a heart attack in the water. I was panicking. I thought I was going to drown. Now swimming is probably the most mind numbing thing. I'm not fast by any means, but I feel free when I'm in the open water, not so much in the pool, but I almost love being in the open water, of course not when it's wavy; when it's more calm. It's crazy how you can change your mindset once you give things a chance and kind of get passed that fear. It's an important lesson.

Going to the concerts, if that's something you really love to do and it brought you pure joy, you can't be scared. What life are you going to live? What memory are you going to give for these people that passed if you're not out there enjoying your life, right?

Absolutely.

I've become a lot more gutsy. I tried snowboarding a few weeks ago. You can get me to about try anything now. I'm like, well, I have survived this; what else can I try? Let's go jump out of a plane. I haven't done that yet.

There is always one more thing to try.

I know, right?

Good for you. Thank you very much.

You're welcome.

I really appreciate this a lot, Christina.

Of course. Of course.

[End of recorded interview]