

A New Angle

Episode 48

June 2, 2022

Justin Angle: We recorded the following episode of A New Angle prior to the shooting in Uvalde, Texas. The United States is the only country in the world where shootings like this occur. That's a form of American exceptionalism none of us should accept. So rather than dig in on your prior position, whatever it is, it's time for all of us to think about how we can make things better and then work to make it happen.

Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today I speak with Stephanie Wittles-Wachs, co-founder and chief creative officer at Lemonada Media and host of the powerful podcast Last Day. Last Day investigates what's killing us. And the just released Season Three takes a hard look at gun violence and suicide.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: You know, our goal is always solutions. Our goal is always let's reduce harm, let's have less people die. So, we will take people's stories and then we

will weave in experts that we talk to and try to get somewhere by the end of the season that's different from where we started.

Justin Angle: Stephanie and her team traveled throughout Montana to speak with families who've lost loved ones to suicide. And through this podcast, they try to answer the difficult question: How can we live alongside guns more safely? Stephanie, thanks for coming on the show.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Justin Angle: So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: So, I grew up in Houston, Texas. I spent the first 18 years of my life there. My dad was a general practitioner, medical doctor, internal medicine. And my mom was a homemaker and was a rabid PTO president. She was just very involved in everything that we did growing up.

Justin Angle: Indeed. Okay. So, tell us kind of your potted bio of how you got to where you are today as far as, you know, set to set the stage. I know you've done voice acting and now this form of journalism. Tell us about it.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: My background is in theater and voice acting and directing and writing and I have done creative things my entire life. I think the first theater class they put me in I was maybe three and just kept going from there. And then in 2015, something really excruciating happened to my family. We lost my little brother Harris Wittels, to a heroin overdose. And he I say his full name because he was relatively famous. He was a standup comedian. He wrote and produced Parks and Recreation. If you've seen that he was on the show. If you've seen the show, he played the animal control guy. Fun trivia for you. I'm just going to keep ragging on him for a second because he's really special. He invented the term humblebrag. If you've ever used that. He came up with that. That came from his brain. And Sarah Silverman, who's a dear family friend, said that he was the funniest guy who ever lived.

Justin Angle: That's high praise.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Not a guy you would think would be addicted to opiates. And when he kind of started this journey of addiction, I had to kind of open my eyes to something that I didn't think would ever impact me. And I didn't know what to do. He was my only brother, my only sibling. True, first best friend in the world. We were very close, and I followed all the things that they told us to do. And I thought I was doing the right thing. And we lost him anyway. And I was left kind of going, well, this is interesting. You know, the information we've been getting is clearly flawed. I want to dig into this. I want to know if we could have done anything to save him. And I hooked up with another gal.

Her name is Jessica Cordova Kramer, and she lost her brother the same way in 2017. So, we started the show called Last Day and the first season we addressed opioids. We did 26 episodes. I learned so much, so, so much. I get on my soapbox constantly now about harm reduction and all the things we should be doing differently for people who are dealing with substance use disorder. Season Two we did a season on suicide and mental health and now we are in Season Three and we are doing guns. So massive epidemics that are hard to comprehend getting worse every day. And as we dug into that, we were like, oh, my goodness, you know, people really need this content. We get emails and tweets and texts that are like, you saved me. And I'm like, really? I have a theater degree. That's incredible! But we really got into it going, we want to save lives. That's why we want to do this work. And so, we created a whole network called Lemonada. We recently launched our 22nd show.

Justin Angle: Yeah, you have so many shows.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: 50 full time staff.

Justin Angle: Wow.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: So anyway, yes, we became accidental media moguls. And. Yeah, and that's what we do.

Justin Angle: Here we are. And so Last Day has been kind of your project from the start. You mentioned the first two seasons this season has brought you to Montana. I've listened to the first two episodes, and they are powerful. Tell us how you kind of, the second season being on suicide, you decided in Season Two to dig into guns and suicide by gun in particular. Talk about that decision to move into Season Three's topic.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: We have had such an incredible time doing a season. You know, we went to Montana, we were there for ten days. But it was an amazing experience to be able to sit with folks in their living rooms and hear their stories. The reason we got to Montana is because we did a story about suicide clusters in Season Two, and we met a woman who worked as a suicide prevention activist in Wyoming, and she introduced us to this idea of cowboy culture and guns. We couldn't stop thinking about it. They are inextricably linked. 86% of firearm deaths in Montana are suicides.

Justin Angle: That's such a striking statistic. And it's in the front matter of your work. And it's such an important issue that I don't think many Montanans realize it's such an epidemic. Before we kind of get into some of the details, maybe tell us about your background and just what place were you coming from? What was your attitude toward guns or experience with them prior to this project?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: I was squarely on my team, my team's side, and that's really how it shakes out. And it's interesting when you're, when you're on your team's side, you think, well, this is the right team. This is the right way.

Justin Angle: Absolutely.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: And you think the other people are wrong and I'm right and that's the end. And they're looking at you and they're going, you're crazy and you're wrong. And I'm right. And that's the end. And we're not getting anywhere. We are not getting anywhere with that. And it's been fascinating to do the season because I have been ranting and raving for years about, let's ban all the guns, let's get rid of them all. You know, the only purpose of a gun is to kill somebody. Why do we need them? My kids are in danger. We're all in danger. And I, I still hold on to some of that, but it is a far grayer issue than I've ever been able to understand. There is so much more nuance. It is such a cultural issue. I think going to Montana and meeting folks who lost their closest loved ones, their version of my brother, to a gun related death and then 'don't blame the gun' was absolutely eye opening for me. And I think if we could, it seems so simple, but actually start to listen to one another and approach gun violence through a harm reduction lens, I think we could get a lot further.

Justin Angle: And maybe, you've used that term harm reduction a couple of times. I just want to make sure listeners understand what that means. Can you define it for us?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Yeah, it's something we don't do very often in this in this place of America, but quite simply, it's reducing harm. So, it's taking risky behavior and making it safer. You can think about condoms as being harm reduction. Seatbelts as harm reduction. With gun violence, we can also take a harm reduction approach. So safe storage, secure storage, making sure people have evidence-based data like, you know, one of the things that was like really eye opening was meeting a guy in the first episode who I had absolutely nothing in common with. Like we would have been arch enemies on the internet, I assure you. And I absolutely loved him. I think the feeling was mutual. We got along swimmingly well, and he really opened my eyes to the fact that self-defense is something that sounds very like talking points, but actually is real. That like when we are afraid of somebody harming our families, when we are afraid of somebody coming into our homes, when are afraid of a virus. Like I can think about it with masks. Masks are harm reduction. Right? Fear makes us do things that aren't necessarily data driven. So, like I can tell somebody that, hey, if you have a gun in your house, you are three times more likely to die or somebody else in your house is three times more likely to die. That self-defense weapon that you absolutely have, because I believe you, you want to keep your family safe is actually putting them at greater risk. And I think, like you said, people don't know this stuff. And if we approach people with this lens of like, you want to do the right thing, you just need the information and the evidence, then maybe we can get somewhere. Instead of like, I'm coming to take all your guns. Nobody reacts to that.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And even presenting people with just raw information without context or nuance is sort of alienating as well. I mean, you can tell them the statistics all day long, but they're going to say, you know, no, I'm not a statistic. I'm a human being and I'm unique and I have all these unique concerns to me. So, it goes even deeper than that, I would think.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And we also really got into this idea of credible messengers this season. So, like, honestly, I'm not the one that needs to be sharing that data with people in Montana. I am, I joke in the show like I'm a coastal elite. You know, they're not going to listen to me. It needs to be someone from the community. It needs to be someone who knows the culture there and is immersed in the culture there and can actually speak to people in community terms that people will understand.

Justin Angle: So, speaking of communities, so you spent time in the Bitterroot Valley. You spent time in Drummond, and I believe you spent time in Bozeman. Talk about those choices. How did you get connected with these people? How did you develop enough trust to be welcomed into their homes to talk about what has to be like the most unimaginable hardship for them to talk about?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: I mean, the first season was my story, so I totally understand. I always start here, right? Like I get it, how awful, and also therapeutic and sort of freeing

it is to tell your story and to share your story and what great impact we can make on each other when we just talk and share our stories. So, it takes a long time. I mean, you know, it's like squirreling away, right? It's like you meet one person and they connect you to this person. They connect you to this person, and it's like finding your sources. So, we got connected to a guy named Karl Rosston who's amazing. He's like a legend in Montana. He has a very fancy title as the suicide prevention coordinator for the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

Justin Angle: It's a big job.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: He is like a walking data set. He can, like spout out data like no one I've ever met. But anyway, Karl hooked up with Jenn and Dori from the Center for Mental Health in Helena, and they connected us to three moms who sit on the board of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in Montana. So, we hopped on a Zoom with them late summer and kind of told them about the project, explained what our goals were for the project, sent them samples of the show to hear, and just did like you do in any relationship when you build trust, right? Just taking time and being honest and transparent. You know, like a lot of people in this space who have lost loved ones, there is a kind of force that happens, I think, with a lot of us. And I see it a lot, like with moms and women, right? Like I'm not trying to gender, but I do think there's like this need to make meaning out of it. And we always say on the show, like, it's rare that dads will talk to us. So, we got so many dads to talk to us this season, which was amazing. I think being in the

homes and meeting them and seeing people face to face and bringing them cookies and shaking their hands and looking them in the eye really helps to build goodwill.

Justin Angle: There's a particularly telling moment along those lines, I think in episode two where the father says, I wouldn't have said yes to this conversation a year ago, but now I'm ready. And that just kind of gives you insight into that, that journey these families are on.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: I know. And it's like, it's so brave to share your story. And it's, it's honestly like we get feedback, great feedback from people, but it is not until I receive the email from the family.

Justin Angle: Yeah.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: That says thank you. We are so grateful. You know, and sometimes it's like, holy cow, this was absolutely horrible to listen to. And I am having an emotional experience like I can't describe, but I appreciate you telling our story. Right. And so, hearing that for families I think is often really cleansing because you can hear like, wow, this is this is how our story sounds, right? And, you know, when you're inside of it, it's hard to see.

Justin Angle: And then the sort of courage for your team and the responsibility really to take this this really intimate dialog with these families and to feel like you need to portray it in a way that's true to them, but also advances the points in the story that you're wanting to tell as well.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: You know, our goal is always solutions. Our goal is always, let's reduce harm, let's have less people die. So, we will take people's stories and then we will weave in experts that we talk to and try to get somewhere by the end of the season that's different from where we started.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to my conversation with Stephanie Wittles-Wachs after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Stephanie Wittles-Wachs about her powerful new podcast Last Day. And let's maybe draw that out. Talk about some of the broader lessons you and your colleagues learned over the course of reporting this season. And then maybe we'll pivot to solutions after that if such are available?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Yeah. I mean, I think like what's been pretty revelatory is that all the seasons are very similar. Right. It's continuously really surprising how much overlap there is. A lot of this comes back to unresolved trauma, systemic inequity and lack

of resources. I mean, you can look at addiction, suicidal ideation, gun violence and see these direct lines. So, like, let's look at Montana, for example. You've got altitude that plays a factor, socioeconomics, lack of behavioral health. This was staggering to me. As of 2018, Montana had 18.5 psychologists per every 100,000 residents. So that's 5,400 people per psychologist. You can't argue with that. That's that is a lack of resources. And then you've got this isolation there. Right. So, you're in seven people per square mile. National average is 88.7. So. You're dealing with isolation, poverty, food deserts, lots of high-risk populations, and then a lack of people who can help. There's also this, like, like we said, this cowboy mentality, right? There's a lot of stigma still around behavioral mental health. And, you know, we also covered Atlanta the season as well. They're dealing with a lot of similar issues. And so, one thing that was really striking for us was how similar these communities are. Atlanta has the second largest wealth gap in America, second only to San Juan, Puerto Rico. It's huge. And they're also dealing with a different kind of isolation in their communities, a lot of abandonment, a lot of sort of feeling, feeling of being forgotten. So, I think, you know, in both of these communities, we kept hearing like it's basically kill or be killed. Right. Like, I have to defend myself and my family or I will be in danger. Right. So, there's a lot of that.

Justin Angle: And where do you think where do you think that fear kind of comes from? Because it's in very different manifestations, or a very different context, Atlanta versus Montana. But where does that fear of the other or the unknown kind of come from?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: In Montana, we heard over and over again that self-defense is really, really critical. When you dig into the statistics, the crime statistics, there were three incidences on record last year, three where a homeowner had to use a firearm in self-defense. So, again, there's a cultural piece to this. I think that there are organizations like the NRA that have really successfully used fear as a tool. And fear is a really successful tool. You know, it's great. It's a great tool to have in your toolbox.

Justin Angle: Well, and fear operates effectively on both sides of this issue. For the folks that, you know, are pro-gun reform or anti-gun, you know, they are probably irrationally fear fearful of being in a mass shooting. Those are relatively infrequent compared to, you know, death by suicide or other forms of gun deaths

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Absolutely. Let me share the numbers. So, this was something that I had to really kind of reflect on for myself, because I was one of these people that after every mass shooting was posting, like eradicate the gun, no AR 15s, you know. Well, so 2019, the Gun Violence Archive reported that 417 mass shootings happened in 2019 and they resulted in 465 deaths. 465. Okay. By contrast, 14,414 people were killed by someone else, so a homicide, and 23,941 died by suicide. So, 95% of gun related deaths are due to homicide and suicide. And mass shootings, if you're looking at the news, you would think it was the leading cause, truly. I mean, it sounds like it. There's also just like so much stigma still around it. There's this attitude of, you know, from my side, if you're going to have a gun in your house, like you deserve it. What?

Right. That's crazy. Yeah. I mean, it's like this is the kind of stuff that's just not going to get us anywhere. Like, do we want to just yell at each other, or do we want to make some change? And I am really tired of yelling, and I want people to be safer.

Justin Angle: Absolutely. And that's why, you know, I love this sort of work that you're doing, because it takes courage to kind of get into the messy middle, if you will, and try to really understand the issue. And situated as a media enterprise yourselves, like we're in this media ecosystem that, you know, that yelling at each other is sort of the result that the media system wants. It gets people engaged, it keeps people, you know, clicking or watching or whatever it is. So, talk about how you've been able to build an audience and following get through to people given this sort of commitment to long form truth telling.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Yeah, I think it was. It's so interesting when we had the idea for the show, we shopped it around to various outlets. Lots of very successful outlets that we wanted to be a part of. And the feedback we got was, this is a great idea. It's very niche.

Justin Angle: Really?

Stephanie: Wittles-Wachs And we and yeah. And we were like, listen, we've done the research. It is not niche.

Justin Angle: Not at all.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Millions of people are impacted by addiction. Millions of people are impacted by mental health issues. And what if we take a human approach to this work? So, we get past the headlines, and we talk about the human impact of these headlines, and we really dive into solutions. Right? So, this is something really important to us. If you are a mother, a sister, a father, a wife, a husband, and you are a parent and your kid is struggling with substance use disorder, you want to know what you can do to help. We try really hard to be as apolitical as we can be. We talk about systemic issues. We talk about obviously political landscapes, but we really try to hone in on the human impact and first-person stories, because if you're telling first person stories, you can't really argue with those. Do you know what I mean? It's like this is this person's lived experience. So, if we can learn from somebody's lived experience and consult experts who have tons of evidence and data, I think we're going to make the conversation more productive.

Justin Angle: And maybe talk about some of those, you know, kind of key takeaways with regard to, you know, suicide and gun violence, particularly here in Montana. You know, what were some of the things that you came away from thinking? You know, one, this changed my mind. But two, this gives me hope that, you know, solutions could be crafted.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: There are so many, so many ways to think about this. I think the biggest takeaway is, like I keep sort of repeating, harm reduction is really critical in this space that we are not going to get rid of the guns anytime soon. And we probably shouldn't, right, in many cases. Like one thing I learned in Montana is that there are actual real life uses for a gun in Montana.

Justin Angle: There's lots, yeah.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: You know, I mean, it's like in my mind, well, I don't need a gun in Pacific Grove, California, but if I need to feed my family, I'm going to need to have a gun. And I don't think that I ever would have been able to understand that. I went on an eight-hour hunting trip. Okay. We got up at four in the morning. I'd never been hunting in my life. I'd never shot a gun in my life. I shot a gun with, you know, this guy who builds AR 15s, which starting out was like the scariest thing in the world. It represents mass shootings in America. What was it like, majorly shocking, is I had so much fun shooting, right?

Justin Angle: Yeah. That comes across in episode one for sure. Like that sort of cognitive dissonance that you were experiencing.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Totally. And, you know, just say no is really problematic, right? I'm fundamentally opposed to just say no with anything. The problem with guns,

it's not that innately guns are evil. It's that if you hit a moment of crisis, which we all do, and you have a loaded firearm that is accessible to you, you are more likely to die. And that's just like very simple, where there are more guns, there are more gun related deaths. We need to learn how to talk to folks about storing their guns if they had a moment of crisis, not taking the guns away forever, but leaving them with a trusted source. I mean, we learned about this amazing program in Colorado and it's Colorado's gun storage map. And they basically have like a blue dotted map with icons about where you can store your guns all over the state if you feel like you you are unsafe.

Justin Angle: Okay.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: So, education is really important. Doing stuff like putting a photo of your loved one on your gun safe. Putting a note to yourself on your gun. Call, Bill. Call, Fred. Right.

Justin Angle: Just systems to slow things down.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Slow things down. Put space between it and the highest rate, you know, of people we're losing are middle aged white men. And there are a lot of those in Montana. Right. There's like an inextricable link between the fact that we are losing men to suicide, and that mental health is not acceptable. Right. Like talking about mental health, talking about your feelings. I just saw a really shocking and horrible statistic that

guns are now the leading cause of death for youth and adolescents. It has surpassed car accidents, so it's a huge problem. And I think if we talk to gun owners and we said, listen, that gun that you have there to keep your family safe is actually putting them in danger. If a credible messenger delivered that message, I think we could get somewhere.

Justin Angle: So, one of the things that occurs to me is these folks you speak with in the season where, you know, you mentioned a moment ago that they they've gone through this tremendous loss associated with the gun, yet they don't blame the gun. In your conversations, do they seem open to some of these other harm reduction techniques? Do they are they are they willing to broaden the aperture to all the other kind of cultural and societal forces that we could address before just simply saying take it away?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Absolutely. Absolutely. But this is but this is the really sad part, right, is that they've all lost their sons. Yes, they think that now. But we shouldn't have to lose your child.

Justin Angle: It shouldn't be the cost of changing your mind. Yeah.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: You know, I mean. And unfortunately, because it is such a polarizing issue, this is kind of where we are right now. We're at a stalemate. And, you know, there's such a difficult time getting legislation passed. And I think this is what happens too, right. We go, well, let's throw up our hands because it's too hard an issue to

fix, and that's just unacceptable. Like, I don't accept that. I think there's a lot of progress to be made here. I think it's a multifaceted issue. It's going to take a lot of work on everybody's part.

Justin Angle: Well, so, Stephanie, before we wrap here, I would, we've talked about a lot of hard topics, some very personal to you, personal to probably many of the listeners here. Let's just close by asking, hey, when you're in Montana, what did you do for fun? What fun things happened during your trip here in Montana?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: We had so much fun in Montana. We, really, we had so much fun. So, I loved, the hunting trip was so great. I mean, it's absolutely gorgeous.

Justin Angle: Isn't it?

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: It's absolutely beautiful. The people were so lovely. We had fantastic meals. We were able to be together as a team for the first time during the pandemic. And we like we work on really hard stuff. So, I think we're very close team and you know, it was honestly just like a truly delightful experience. Everyone we met was so nice and warm and welcoming and inviting. And I see what a wonderful community it is. And I think going there gave me a ton of hope. I will be coming back.

Justin Angle: Awesome. Well, please look us up when you do. Stephanie, it was so great to learn about this project, this important work. Thank you for doing it. And we hope you and your colleagues at Lemonada to continue to push into the nuance of these really hard stories. Thanks for joining us today.

Stephanie Wittles-Wachs: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Justin Angle: If you're thinking about suicide, are worried about a friend or loved one, or would like emotional support, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
1-800-273-8255.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49. A generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. A.J. Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott. And Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. We'll see you next time.