



Episode 4: Carla

Official Transcript

Aren A quick note, today's episode includes description of a violent act, starting around the 11-minute mark. Details are given in the show notes. If you would like to skip that portion or this episode, we understand.

From SECC Youth, this is *Dear Church*, a podcast where we hear what Seventh-day Adventist young adults would like to say, but only after first learning who they are. I'm your host, Aren Rennacker.

Okay, pop quiz: Who is the best Seventh-day Adventist athlete ever? Besides yourself, of course. Well, I guess it depends on your definition of Adventist. Because there are world famous athletes who were raised in the SDA Church: Magic Johnson, Usain Bolt, NBA star DeAndre Ayton, to name a few. But those ties seemed to fade when they were young or once their careers took off. It happens.

I don't know who the greatest Adventist athlete ever is, but I do know who might be the best that I've ever seen. Her name is Carla. She didn't make it to the pros, but she excelled in basketball at both the high school and college levels, and then followed that by taking on marathon running. It truly seemed like there was nothing physically that Carla couldn't do—until one night, a few years ago, when her life was suddenly changed in an instant. And

in the midst of pain and disappointment and questions, Carla had to learn just how much she was really capable of.

Here's her story.

Carla Hi, I'm Carla. And this is *Dear Church*.

Aren When you ask Carla what comes to mind when she thinks about her Adventist upbringing, she gives the same answer I've heard from many young adults.

Carla Sabbath was boring. My grandparents were so strict about the Sabbath, which a lot of people were in that generation, so we couldn't play games, we couldn't swim in the pool, we couldn't swim in a lake. So it was really just sitting around waiting for sundown to go down and to be able to play, I guess.

Aren And how was it with your parents?

Carla Definitely very strict parents, which I don't think was a bad thing. I think it was good to have boundaries. But no drinking, no drugs, no *Harry Potter* books. Like a lot of that kind of stuff was not allowed in our house.

Aren: Which of those three would be the worst: drinking, drugs, or *Harry Potter*?

Carla Well, I guess it depends who you ask. [LAUGHS]

Aren So this type of upbringing that included weekly sundown sitting sessions is especially hard for a kid like Carla. From a young age she loved to run and play and compete. Which works great when you have a twin brother.

Carla I would always try to finish like our book for the year before Casey did. And so there was one time when I finished my math book first, and I was like, "Hey Case, I'm done with third grade math." And so he's like, "Oh, well I have one more page on *Hooked on Phonics*." And I was like, "Oh no no, just wait. I'm going to do the last page with you because it's really fun."

So, the next day he sits down like, "Hey Carla, ready to do the last page?" and I turned to him and I turned to then to my mom and hand her the book, and I'm like, "Mom, I finished all my work." That's like the first example that I can think of of being competitive, and Casey will tell that story all the time because I was a jerk.

Aren Thankfully, for Casey, Carla began channeling her competitive spirit away from phonics and towards sports. When most of the girls went to the monkey bars at recess, she would follow Casey to play with the boys. What started as a favorite recess game soon became a passion.

Carla Probably around 4th grade for me was when I really started liking basketball.

Announcer 1 ...and he has the ability to get in and he also has that little medium range jump shot.

Carla The Lakers were going on a three-peat and, you know, Kobe was new to the league.

Announcer 2 Kobe Bryant, double teamed, looking for help. Forces up the fadeaway and makes it! My gosh!

Announcer 3 Bryant with Balkman defending. Wow!

Announcer 4 Bryant the drive. Ah oh! Kobe Bryant on a rack attack!

Carla I didn't actually know his name, the correct way to say his name. So, we were watching, I remember watching it in the basement of our Maryland house and I was just yelling, like, "Oh yeah, *Kobe*, he's my favorite."

Announcer 2 *Three timeouts left, the Lakers have two. Bryant to Shaq!*

Aren And that's when you started playing as well?

Carla I started playing on my first team in fifth grade. I was the only fifth grader that made the team, so I felt like of course I was better than everybody else in my class, which was so stupid. But yeah, fifth grade is when I got on the team and it was a lot of fun.

Announcer 2 *...turns, pumps it up. Off the rim, and the Lakers are the 2000 NBA Champions!*

Aren Carla began playing every day. By the time she entered high school, she really only saw it as being about basketball. Which—I mean, it was an Adventist academy, so not the best idea. On top of that, in high school, the girls' games are often treated like the warm-up act to the boys' games that follow.

But that didn't happen with Carla. People came to watch her team, and they came to watch her. Her senior year they won a school-record 26 games and she was named league Most Valuable Player. Colleges began calling Carla about playing for them, but when it came time to decide she chose an Adventist school, where instead of free tuition, athletes got a free pair of shoes. Her freshman year the team went 1-25. That's more losses in one season than Carla had in four years of academy.

Aren How would you describe your transition from playing in high school to playing in college?

Carla Devastating. Coming off of a program in high school that we were really good then coming to this new program where we were really bad was really difficult. And I hit a breaking point my freshman year where after a game I realized we are never going to win a game this season. And I just cried, and I remember thinking, like, why are we working so hard for something that we're never going to succeed at?

That for me was very difficult but it ended up still being a really good thing. We got better. We were never good, but we got better, at least. And I have great memories.

Aren By the time she graduated, Carla held her college's all-time records for points, assists, steals, and minutes. It's not a stretch to say she's the best player in her school's history, maybe among all Adventist schools, but nobody keeps track of that.

This isn't to say it was easy. Carla remembers 6am practices, shortened summer breaks, and spending her Christmas vacations in stuffy vans headed to tournaments she knew they would lose every game at. It was like the sport she loved since 4th grade: it gave, and it took away.

Carla Yeah, my brother and sister both went to Spain and they are both fluent in Spanish and I decided to stay and play basketball on no scholarship. [LAUGHS] But I still attribute that to—Daniel and I wouldn't be married at this point if I would have probably gone abroad, so I guess it's worth it.

Daniel: What?!

Aren Meet, Daniel. Carla's husband.

Daniel Is that what she says? [LAUGHS]

Aren I decided it wouldn't hurt to talk with him too. Carla and Daniel began dating in college, where he also played on the school basketball team. And when he moved to Florida

for an internship, he wanted her to come with him. So he proposed. Carla remembers it fondly.

Carla Poor guy. I think he was so nervous. So, he's like, "Hey, we're going to go to the beach today," when I was in Florida. But then it was like nine o'clock, ten o'clock, and then it was like four o'clock and I'm like, "Are we going to go to the beach or not?" So then I was like, "Oh okay, like this is proposal day. We're going to the beach at sunset."

So we drive an hour and a half to the beach and we're sitting on the beach and I'm just looking at the sunset and I'm thinking to myself, "He's going to miss it. It's going down, he's going to miss it," and he looks at me he's like, "Hey, I'm gonna go to the bathroom." Like, that's romantic.

So, then he comes back with a piece of cake and I'm like, "Oh the ring is in the cake." And so then I'm like eating the cake like super carefully and then he's like, "Hey what's that over there?" And I'm like, "Seriously?" So I turn around and I knew like he's going to be on one knee, and I waited for a while and, poor guy, I just made him sweat. And I waited for a while and then I finally turned around and I was like, "Oh wow." Like tried to act surprised, but I knew he was going to do it. But he was so nervous. It was very cute.

Aren Is this all true, Daniel?

Daniel Oh my goodness. Can I back up a little bit?

I had my friend who was going to take pictures get a cheesecake, because for some reason I felt like food should accompany this proposal for some reason, like hey let's celebrate with a cheesecake. [LAUGHS] In my mind I was still thinking I could surprise her somehow. So, when it was at sunset I was like, "Hey Carla, I need to go use the bathroom." I didn't have to use the bathroom, I just wanted to go change, meet up with my friend, grab the cheesecake, and get the ring.

Aren And when you returned, is it true that in order to get her to face the other way, you said, quote, “Hey, what’s that over there?”

Daniel [LAUGHS] I am nothing if not original.

I remember I changed into my salmon shorts, my yellow button up. I was looking good. And I was like “Hey, what’s that over there?” She looks away. She falls for it, completely.

Aren Got’em. [LAUGHS]

Daniel: Got’em.

You know, I think our proposal is an example of one that should never be replicated. But it is truly unique.

Aren You’ll be surprised to learn that it wasn’t just a life with Daniel that drew Carla to Florida. She was also able to land her dream job as a neuro outpatient physical therapist, where instead of top-level athletes, she served patients who suffered from strokes, Parkinson’s, and spinal cord injuries. She also channeled her competitive spirit into running, from 5K’s to marathons, and in the fall of 2018 began training with a friend to compete in her first Iron Man Triathlon.

Daniel, meanwhile, was also excelling in his work, in healthcare finance, and entering year five of their marriage things were good.

Carla This was a Thursday, and it had been a pretty good day. Thursdays where my short days which was good. And so, I left early because I was excited, and so by the time I was heading home my friend called me. And her and I were talking about all our plans about how we were going to work out every single day and we're going to

eat only vegetables and protein, like just stupid stuff. Like that was never going to happen, but those were our plans.

And as I turn onto this road that I had turned on thousands of times, there's this car that looked like they were pulling out of their driveway. And it was a red sedan and as they started pulling out I almost came to a complete stop because obviously I didn't want to run into them. So I was almost completely stopped and as soon as they started turning towards me to like drive by, the front of the car turned toward me and I started seeing the lights flashing from a gun and I started hearing gunshots. And at that moment I just said, "Molly someone's shooting at me." And right after I said that was I think when I was hit. So I was hit in the left side of my chest and all I remember, my phone must have flew out of my hand and it landed on my dashboard where I could see Molly's name light up on the screen and I could hear her talking like, "Carla, Carla, what's going on? What's happening?" And then after that I turned to the left and I saw the car drive away. And I remember all of that and then as soon as that happened, I think I went into shock and I don't remember anything for the last six days after that.

Daniel Nothing special about that day, for most of the day. I had a basketball game, city league basketball game that evening. I remember going to the game, I think we lost the game, and I get back to the bench after the game, I look at my phone and I have a couple missed calls from my buddy Carl. And I call him back and his voice is shaking and he's like, "Hey, I don't know what's going on but I think something happened to Carla. I said, "Okay, what happened to Carla?" And Carl is the husband of the person that Carla was supposed to meet, Mollie. I was like, "Okay, what happened, did Carla and Mollie get together?" she's like—*he* said, "No, they didn't get together, but Mollie was talking to Carla on the phone, and she thought she heard some loud noises in the background, maybe gunshots, and then the call dropped."

Aren Daniel and another friend, Sam, began the 30-minute drive from the gym to Carla's route home—still unsure of what was going on.

Daniel And we get not maybe two minutes from where we live and we go down this road and there's a police car on one side of the road not letting any traffic through. So we stopped there, I'm like, "What's going on?" and the police officer doesn't really say much of anything, he said something happened, there was an incident on this road but doesn't tell me anything. So policemen are looking the other way and I hop in the car with Sam and we drive down to the hospital, the only trauma center to where she would be taken to.

Greg Warmoth, WFTV *Investigators say a woman was on the phone driving home when she was shot along this Orange County road, but tonight they still don't know who shot her, and neighbors want answers.*

Neighbor *It was complete silence before and complete silence after.*

Greg Warmoth *All investigators know is what the person on the other end of the phone heard during the attack.*

That friend of the victim says she heard rapid gunfire, and then the phone just went dead.
Good evening, I'm Greg Warmoth.

Martha Sugalski *And I'm Martha Sugalski. Tonight, deputies still don't know if the victim was targeted or if this was a random act. New right now at five...*

Daniel And at that moment the detectives came in and they asked to speak to me privately, so we go into a side little room and the detectives talk to me for about 90 minutes. I'm glad that happened because it helped me take my mind off of the infinite possibilities of what could happen to Carla, most of them being, like, what if just—what if she's dead? We said goodbye in the morning just like any other day, we maybe texted a little bit throughout the day, and then that's it, that's the last I talk to her and she's just taken like that.

Aren Doctors began evaluating the extent of Carla's injuries. She lay in critical condition with severe damage to her kidney, spleen, pancreas, and liver. It took emergency surgery just to save her life—the first hurdle cleared, with many still ahead. The only thing that could be said for certain was that had it not been for Carla's phone call with Mollie at the exact time of the shooting, this all would have looked very different.

Daniel The most emotional moment for me visually was when we get up to her room, and we probably have a dozen, fifteen friends there at that point, me and my sister go up into her room, and I just see—I see her in the bed and to me, just a million tubes and wires, and everything hooked up to her, and it's just like, what happened. What happened?

I tear up every time I visualize that moment, walking into that hospital room the first time and seeing her—just because it's the person you care for and love so deeply, care for the most and love so deeply, to see them in that condition and for you to be as helpless, for me to be as helpless as I was is the worst feeling. There was nothing I could do.

Aren Carla would have three major surgeries in the first three days. She remained intubated on days four and five as doctors ran additional tests. Finally, on day six, Daniel got a phone call that told him Carla was awake.

Daniel So I run up to the hospital and I go into the room and she's there. She's talking. I mean, her voice is very raspy and she can't really talk, but she's attentive. She's processing things. I mean, for the first time in six days she's alert. And Carla's back.

Aren According to Carla's mom, the first words she said when she woke up were, "Was I shot?" Until then, it wasn't known if Carla had sustained head injuries that would affect her speech or cognition, and so seeing her awake and talking felt like two more important hurdles were cleared. Now they had to begin helping her understand all that had happened.

Carla They didn't know if there was going to be any kind of brain activity, they had no idea, so when I woke up and I said I was shot, they were like, my mom was like, oh so she remembers all of this.

And then the next thing I think I said to her was, "I hope I'm not paralyzed."

Aren By this time, Carla's family knew what doctors had discovered: the high-caliber bullet had entered her chest, and exploded like a bomb, damaging several of her organs and causing a complete spinal cord injury at T6, leaving her with no feeling below her belly button. Carla says she doesn't remember the moment she was told this, it's not like you see in the movies, but it was more of a gradual acceptance of how different her life would now be.

Carla There was one moment where Daniel was sitting in the room watching some sporting event and I remember thinking, like, I'm trapped in this body that doesn't work. I think that was probably the first realization of like, oh my goodness, I can't do a whole lot for myself at this point. And I feel like the same exact person in a body that has failed me.

Aren Carla began a cycle of going between hospital units and rehab centers. She started using a wheelchair and began struggling through some of the same exercises she used to teach to her own patients. At one point she contracted an infection and had to be rushed back to the hospital, where she went into sepsis. She stayed for two weeks, resetting much of the physical progress she had made. A harsh reminder that her recovery would neither be smooth nor linear; there was no banner waiting at the finish line for her to cross.

After three months, Carla went home. During that time, Daniel had moved them from a two-story to a one-story home that was modified for wheelchair use. This was her first time seeing their new house. He considers it redemption for his proposal, a surprise he got right.

Daniel also provided regular Facebook updates throughout Carla's journey, which resulted in unexpected messages from Adventists across the world letting them know they were thinking of Carla and praying for her.

Carla I still meet people all the time that I say like, "Oh, you're Carla, I was praying for you," or "I'm still praying for you," so definitely have had a ton of support from the Adventist community, even all over the world, people praying and so that was super helpful.

Daniel We were getting Marco's Pizza delivered one time, and the delivery guy was like, "Hey, are you Daniel Monnier?" I'm like yeah. He's like, "Oh, I heard about your wife's story and everything that's going on there." I'm like this is the pizza delivery guy. I'm like, "Okay, cool, it's nice to meet you."

Carla I think it goes to show how much people care about each other. And, you know, everybody knows somebody in Adventism, so I think it showed to me that, you know, people are not just in their little bubble and care about just themselves. They are concerned about how I'm doing, which was kind of crazy to me still that people were so willing to take the time aside to do that, because we did have an anointing type thing and they had people praying across the country.

I guess this is a good time to bring this up too, is that the anointing service was never about my physical recovery. That it wasn't for me to walk again. It was for me to be able to feel whole mentally, emotionally, and spiritually and to find community, and that's truly what has happened. That I have been whole emotionally and spiritually and mentally because of all of those prayers.

Daniel It truly felt like a super tight knit community, and I felt a lot so much love and support from people I knew, from acquaintances, and from people I didn't know. It was an incredible experience in that regard, and I'm so thankful for it. Because I didn't know what I would have done if not for it. There were lots of times of loneliness and I just feel like the love and support, that was visceral kept me going.

It was just this weird dichotomy of me being so angry at God, but on the other hand feeling all that love and support from Him through people.

Aren It's now been over five years since the shooting. They still don't know who did it, don't have a suspect in mind—they think it may have been part of a gang initiation, they aren't sure. Carla actually says she's thankful for that. Not that she doesn't want to prevent it from happening to someone else, but she knows she's found more peace without a person or face to direct anger towards.

Instead, she's focused on living well today, with the resilience you'd expect to find from any great athlete. She's now mostly independent, save for a few things high up Daniel has to reach for her, and she has him do the dishes—I couldn't get a straight answer on whether that's injury-related. She's also gone back to work, putting in a few hours each week at a physical therapy clinic, and serving as her church's youth ministry leader.

Carla [PREACHING] Good afternoon. My name is Carla, this is my husband, Daniel.

Daniel Hi.

Carla [PREACHING] Right before first service, one of my cousins came up to me and he said, "Good luck, Carla, you're going to do great. People came all across the country for this, no pressure." And I have some family from San Diego and Oklahoma and Maryland here. When we agreed to speak this summer we chose this date because they were all going to be here. They're here celebrating my brother and my 30th birthday, and we are cherishing every moment they're here because they're never coming to Florida in the summer again. [LAUGHTER] But 30 is a milestone and it's also special because I almost didn't make it.

Carla How God created our community to be is to help each other. When one person is in need you step up where you can and so there's that aspect of really having

faith that people are going to be there for you. And really the way that I experience God the most is through others, and I have absolutely felt God's presence through others in the last few years.

This has only grown my relationship with God, which, I know that that's—I hate it when I even say that out loud sometimes. I do want to make it clear that I'm not thankful for this injury. I would absolutely change things if I could. But there are things that I've learned about myself and about God and about our community that is so impactful that it has grown my relationship with God. And maybe it's going back to when I was little I didn't have to rely on God at all and now I do. And so that has been meaningful for me.

Daniel I wouldn't say I wouldn't change anything. I would absolutely change things. What I would do so she could walk again, so she could run up and down a court and play basketball, there's a lot I would do for that. But I know we have something to look forward to eventually in the future. But for now, we're, you know, we're happy.

Carla [PREACHING] I don't know why this happened, and I hope that God can use this terrible situation to help someone, somewhere, in some way. But I haven't lost faith, and God has helped me to find peace.

Now when I think about my perfect day, I don't think about this world because I don't think there will be a day in this world where I won't have physical or emotional pain. My perfect day is being with the ones that I love, walking next to Jesus in heaven.

[APPLAUSE]

Aren Well Carla, can we hear your letter to the Church?

Carla Yes.

Dear Church,

As a child you were a safe place for me. A place where I could be curious, loved, and have fun. A place where I learned my first memory verse and sang about the gently swaying trees. As a teen you provided me with a school that grew and fostered my confidence. I was able to pursue and follow my passion in athletics. I made good friends, I had good teachers, and so many good memories. As a young adult, I did not prioritize you. It was more of an excuse to dress up than getting to know Jesus. I don't blame you, but I also saw many friends leave the church after college.

In my late 20s is when I truly started to understand your importance. You were there for me during difficult times, you were there for my friends, you were there for my family, you were there. You prayed for me, you gave financially, you cooked meals, you never left.

Dear Church, it isn't the 28 fundamental beliefs or the fact that we worship on Saturday or any other legalistic ideals that make you special. It is the people. The people have breathed life into me when I needed it most. The people have laughed and cried with me. Jesus is in the people; therefore, we reflect Jesus to others.

The community I have from church is how I experience God and it is something that I will never forget.

Sincerely,

Carla

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Aren *Dear Church* is a production of SECC Youth and the Southeastern California Conference. It is engineered by JO Cordero and hosted and edited by me, Aren Rennacker. Music is courtesy of Blue Dot Sessions and Envato Elements. Cover art by Taji Saleem.

Thanks so much to today's guests, Carla and Daniel Monnier. Since we spoke, they celebrated another wedding anniversary, and Carla continues to lead youth ministry at her church. She was also unexpectedly diagnosed with Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia, a rare form of blood cancer. The doctors said it was unrelated to any prior medical issues. Carla underwent nine months of treatment, and today she is cancer free.

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