

THE LETTER SEASON 1, EPISODE 1: EVERY PARENT'S NIGHTMARE

Amy Donaldson: Before we get started, a warning to listeners. This podcast includes descriptions of gun violence and associated trauma. Please take care when listening.

(phone rings)

Amy Donaldson: Sy Snarr builds her Monday mornings around this phone call. She's so excited when she sees the caller ID, she nearly drops the phone.

Sy Snarr: George? Hi, George. How are you? I'm good. It's so good to hear from you. I've wondered, I've been wondering if you got your vaccine yet.

Amy Donaldson: She leans back against the couch in the same living room where her life unraveled 25 years ago.

Sy Snarr: Hey, I sent you a letter. You should be getting it any day.

Amy Donaldson: On the wall behind her are four large black and white portraits that freeze her children in time, as teenagers in the 90s. It was a time when Sy couldn't imagine the painful turn their lives were about to take.

To understand why that Monday morning phone call is so significant, we have to go back to the day that Sy Snarr's world fell apart. It was in that same house in a quiet Salt Lake City neighborhood.

Sy Snarr: I came running in the house, I was late and I had somewhere to go...

Amy Donaldson: It was August 28th, 1996. For Sy and her close knit family, it was a day just like every other day.

Sy Snarr: I'd been gone all day and came through the back door and I noticed my kitchen was spotless. And I had not left it that way. And Zach was standing right there. And I said, who cleaned my kitchen? And he said, I did it for ya', mama. And I said thanks, Zach. You know, that was Zach.

Amy Donaldson: It was one of those moments that probably wouldn't stand out except for what came after it.

Sy Snarr: The thing I do think a lot is why didn't I stop and say, Zach, have I told you today you're the greatest? You know, I said thank you, at least I noticed and I'm glad, but why didn't I stop and hug him? That was the last time I ever saw him. Instead of just hurry, hurry, got to be here, gotta be there, you know. Because you just don't realize that's the last time you're gonna see him. That's why you tell people you love them every day.

Amy Donaldson: This story began 25 years ago with a crime that shocked a community. But it's really about what happened after the violence. It's about how those involved rebuild their lives from the wreckage. As unlikely as it seems, it's a story about healing and hope - and something no one saw coming - the chance for redemption.

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Amy Donaldson and this is The Letter - episode one, Every Parent's Nightmare.

Ron Snarr: That morning, actually, that morning he was - he got up and he was dressed ready to go to work.

Amy Donaldson: Ron Snarr stands about six foot three with tan skin and calloused hands from decades of working long, hard days as the owner of a landscaping business. In the summer of 1996, Zach worked alongside him.

Ron Snarr: I get up and I go out, stretch and yawn, look out the window, see if it was raining or anything, and he's sitting there on the couch. He says Dad, where you been? I've been waiting for you. He's sitting there all dressed ready to go. I said, Zach, I'll be right out. (laughs)

Amy Donaldson: Ron laughs easily and often. A lot of times it's his own jokes. But laughter is also his defense mechanism. He uses it to ease tension or to mask pain - like now, when he talks about the last morning that he shared with his son,

Ron Snarr: But that's just the type of guy he was, you know? That's what happened the morning he was gone, he says I've been waiting for you, and I think he still is.

Amy Donaldson: In that house nestled in the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains, the Snarrs raised four children. All four still lived at home that summer. Trent was 21, Sydney 19, Zach 18, and Levi was 15. All of the children were close, but Syd and Zach - separated by just 18 months - they enjoyed a special middle child relationship.

Sydney Snarr: My other brothers were pretty quiet, but Zach was just this outgoing, social creature. And so we were each other's sidekick. I don't have any memories of my childhood without Zach there. We were so close. You know, we were siblings, but more than anything we were friends. I remember he was like, man, what would Mom do without us? Like who would make her laugh? And I was like, oh, I know. Because we considered ourselves the funny ones of the family. I remember Zach sitting in the front room. I can close my eyes and see this like I'm watching a movie and I can feel it. I remember him playing the guitar, and he was self taught. He taught himself how to play Pink Floyd and Eric Clapton and Guns N' Roses, and he would just sit and pick away at his guitar, and I'd always try to sing along. Like I'd just join in and if I heard him in the other room, I'd come runnin' in to sing and it would just drive him so crazy. And we would just, you know, we were always just laughing. Like it was, it was fun.

Amy Donaldson: Syd's last conversation with Zach was a phone call.

Sydney Snarr: I had ridden my bike to work that day, and I had fallen off my bike at a red light. And so I told him about that because it was funny and awkward, and we just laughed together.

Amy Donaldson: Zach had called her at the bakery where she was working, looking for the keys to his Bronco. He was going to pick up his friend Yvette for a date that night.

Sydney Snarr: And that night, when I was riding my bike home from work, he actually drove past me on his way to go pick up Yvette. All of a sudden, I just heard this honking, crazy honking, and I looked up and Zach was driving opposite of me. And he had his body hanging out the front window of the car. And he was just laying on the horn and he had his fist up in the air like this victory, you know, and he was just like, WHAAA you know, as he drove by, and I remember just going, you're a dork. And then he just kept going and I shook my head and like, you know, rolled my eyes and just kept going home. But that was the last time I saw him.

Amy Donaldson: What happened that night, after the break.

(Commercial Break)

Amy Donaldson: Sy says her son loved animals. He might have been a veterinarian, but he was also passionate about music and photography. She's not sure what he might have been if he'd had the chance to chase his dreams. What she does know is that he made the most of the life that he had. And he went out of his way to be friendly to everyone.

Sy Snarr: Even some of our older neighbors said he was the only kid in the neighborhood who had ever stopped and talked to them. He'd see 'em outside and he'd stop and talk to them. How are you doing and he'd help them in with their garbage or out with the garbage. You know, that was just Zach. He was just an amazing young man.

Amy Donaldson: He was responsible, a rule follower with empathy for everyone. Her son, Sy says, believed in doing the right thing even if it didn't seem to matter.

Sy Snarr: There was no gray area for Zach, he would signal in a parking lot. I mean, that's how careful he was, you know, he just did everything right and good and, you know, he never deviated.

Amy Donaldson: For Zach Snarr the summer of 1996 was a bridge between his happy childhood and an adult life that was just coming into focus.

Sy Snarr: He had a date that night with Yvette Rodier, and they had been friends since junior high and just good friends, really good friends, and hung out but had never really dated. But he was going to, I think, teach her how to take pictures.

Ron Snarr: We're all home except Zach. The two boys are downstairs. There's two bedrooms upstairs; Syd was in one and Sy and I in the other.

Sy Snarr: We'd all gone to bed and about 1:15 in the morning, the doorbell rang, and I really thought because there was this group of girls from Ogden, who he hung out with and they were doorbell ditching him again. You know, they did that back and forth. So I didn't get up. I just thought, well, there's those Ogden girls again, you know, the Ogden ladies, he called them.

Sydney Snarr: I was reading in bed. The doorbell rang and then there was knocking, and I went to the door and we had a glass front door. I started opening the door and then I just kind of got a little uncomfortable like wait, it's late, what's going on? And so I called through the glass, I said, can I help you? And they said, is your mom and dad there? And I said yeah, and then one of them pulled out their badge and said I'm with the police department. And I just remember thinking, oh my gosh, our house has been graffitied. And that was like my thought that was the worst thing at that moment that it possibly could have been. So I opened the door and I went into my parents room and I stuck my head in and I said, Mom and Dad, there's some policemen here to see you.

Ron Snarr: She comes in and says the police are at the front door.

Sy Snarr: There's two detectives that want to talk to you. And I looked at my husband, I said, what do they want? Go see what they want.

Ron Snarr: We get up and Sy immediately says Zach's the only one that's not home.

Sydney Snarr: And I said, oh, he's with Yvette. He's fine, but they want to talk to you.

Sy Snarr: I think I knew at that instant it had to do a Zach.

Sydney Snarr: And so my parents came out and they were both just pale.

Ron Snarr: We knew it wasn't going to be good.

Sy Snarr: I said, what's happened to my son? Because I just, I knew. And they said, well, will you sit down?

Sydney Snarr: And they had my parents sit down. And I was standing in the doorway. And they introduced themselves, and there was two policemen and a chaplain there. And they said something like, your son Zachary was involved in a shooting tonight.

Sy Snarr: And I just thought, you've got the wrong kid. Zach would never be involved in something like that.

Sydney Snarr: I remember my dad's voice just cracked and he said, well is he OK?

Sy Snarr: They said he had been shot, and he hadn't made it.

Sydney Snarr: My mom just collapsed across my dad's lap. And my dad laid over her. And they were both just instantly crying and like wailing. And I just remember standing there, just holding onto the door frame into the living room.

Sy Snarr: We told our daughter to go down and get her brothers.

Sydney Snarr: And I ran downstairs into the basement and turned on my brother Levi's light and just started screaming, Zach's dead, Zach's dead, get up, get up. And he was like, what, what? And from there, I ran into Trent's room - he was my older brother - and flipped the light on and he was already sitting up in bed. And I remember he was just pure white, like the blood had just dropped out of his face. And I just screamed, get up, and then ran out the room.

Sy Snarr: I'll never forget their faces when they came upstairs. They were just white and just in shock, you know.

Sydney Snarr: And that's how I told my brothers because I - I just didn't - I regret that. I feel bad, but I was in such shock, though, cause it was, it was just so shocking. Who would hurt him?

Sy Snarr: First thing they said practically was what gang was he affiliated with?

Ron Snarr: Why are you asking this? This is very, very annoying. You know, I was kind of pissed. Like, you know, Zach's the problem. Never been a problem in his whole life. We're denying it all. I says, you know, you got the wrong guy. He's not in no gang. He's never been anywhere. You know, the only thing he's been is a model child.

Sy Snarr: They were saying, did she have a jealous boyfriend? Or has he been fighting with anybody? And we're just like, no, no, no.

Sydney Snarr: My parents were so quietly just saying no, no. And I remember I just like, screamed out, no! Everybody loved Zach!

Sy Snarr: And it was like, just surreal to me, because I just kept thinking, that didn't happen, you know, wake up, this has to be a dream, wake up. But I just kept looking at them and they said, you know, that the girl he was with had been shot, that she was at the hospital, and I'm just like, this cannot be happening. They just went on and on, and I said, wait a minute, are you telling me my son's dead? You know, and they just kinda looked at me like, this woman's not getting it. And I wasn't; it just could not be real to me, you know? This could not have happened to him.

Amy Donaldson: As soon as Sy learned Yvette was at the hospital, she left to sit with her family. Ron walked the neighborhood and talked with friends and family. Zach's siblings turned to each other for comfort.

Sydney Snarr: We cried. We cried and screamed and hugged. A lot of friends and family started coming in and they came to our house all through the night. At some point, somebody gave me a sleeping pill. I remember opening my eyes and the sun was coming in through the window, and it was silent. And I just remember thinking, oh my gosh, that was, that was the worst dream. I can't believe I dreamt that. And I just remember thinking, thank God, that was a nightmare. And I remember getting out of bed and walking out into my house, and it was full of people. And it was just silent and everyone was crying. And everyone was talking in hushed tones. And I remember just the realization that this happened, how could this have happened? And then from there, it was just a whole new nightmare.

Amy Donaldson: After the break, the Snarrs learn more details about Zach's last night.

(Commercial Break)

Amy Donaldson: A couple of days after Zach's murder, the Snarrs visited Yvette at the hospital.

Sy Snarr: It was awful seeing her lay there; her face was so swollen and I was so sad for her. She just looked so small and fragile and I just wept for her. You know, I remember I had to kneel down the foot of her bed because I couldn't stand. I had to just kneel down just because I was - what's the word - devastated. It was devastating.

Amy Donaldson: Yvette offered the Snarrs precious details of Zach's last night.

Sy Snarr: I felt like I needed to know what had happened.

Amy Donaldson: Zach took Yvette out to dinner where they shared their post high school hopes. They traded stories about summer jobs and preparing for college. Both planned to attend the University of Utah in about a week. And Zach, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, talked about the mission he hoped to serve for his church, even though it was still a year away. After dinner, Zach had a surprise for Yvette. They drove up to Little Dell, a reservoir in a nearby canyon. It was a 20 minute drive from the restaurant in Salt Lake City to the small reservoir that is a favorite of fishermen. He hadn't told her where they were going or what they were doing. But when they got there, Yvette found out she was going to get a photography lesson. Zach planned to teach her how to take pictures of the rising full moon reflected on the water. He eased his Bronco into the dirt parking lot. The moon was already rising. They walked down an asphalt path that led to the water. They spread a blanket on the ground. And Zach gave Yvette a jacket he brought to protect her from the chill of the canyon winds. He was just setting up the tripod when a stranger approached them. The man - who

looked about their age - asked the question about where the road went. They told him they didn't know. Just as they turned away, the man pulled out a gun and began shooting at them. Zach and Yvette fell to the ground next to each other. Yvette screamed as the man emptied the gun into their bodies. Then the man reloaded his gun and continued shooting as he walked toward them.

The first bullet that hit Zach likely killed him. Yvette, shot multiple times, somehow survived. We'll hear from Yvette in the next episode. But for now we'll stay with the Snarrs and experience that night as they did.

Laying in a hospital bed still trying to comprehend why they'd been attacked. Yvette provided pieces to a devastating puzzle for the Snarrs. Yvette told Sy that they had eaten calzones at Salt Lake Pizza and Pasta. She told her where they sat and what they'd discussed.

Sy Snarr: I don't know why it mattered, but I never would have known. I never would have known where they ate or - and I had taken him to lunch there a few days before - Zach and I, just the two of us and he liked it. I think that's why he took her there, but I was glad to know that. He had been talking about me to her because I had made this quilt out of old Levi's and he had taken it up there to sit on while they set up the tripod and take pictures. And he told her, I'd made that and that meant so much to me, you know, the fact that he'd take the time to tell her my mama made- he always called me mama, I love that- made this quilt and just that it meant something to him meant a lot to me. Some people may never care, but he did. He was so good. I sound like a mother. I am a proud mother. I've always been very proud to be Zach Snarr's mother.

Amy Donaldson: Ron was unmoored without his son's innate goodness to guide him.

Ron Snarr: Zach was my child that would correct me. When I was in the wrong, he would- I'd feel a tap on my shoulder. (laughs)

Amy Donaldson: He remembers a church trip to a waterpark where Zach kept him in line.

Ron Snarr: I'm down there and being my usual self, demanding this and that. I go up to the girl and said, I need a tube and a life jacket and I forget what else - I named about three things. And I feel the tap on my shoulder. (laughs) And the whole ward's sitting there watching this, you know, and he says, Dad? I turn around. I knew what was coming. He says, there's such a thing as please and thank you. And I said yes, you're right, Zach. So I go around, can I please have this, this and this and thank you very, very much. But he was like that, you know, it didn't matter where I was or what I was doing, he wasn't shy about setting his dad straight. And I needed setting straight quite a bit. That was another question I asked God; I said why would you take him away from me? He was my - he'd watch over me, you know, and make me look a lot better than I really was.

Newscaster: Bishop Thomas Rockwood and many others spent the afternoon and evening comforting the Snarr family. His friends call it a senseless crime without a motive and that for them is the hardest to take.

Friend in newscast: How do you react to someone that you've grown up with dying? There's nothing you can say or do. I just want to know why.

Amy Donaldson: News reports highlighted the random nature of the crime. There was speculation that the 19-year-old shooter just wanted to see somebody die. The community struggled to make sense of the shooting. Keith Stevens was the lead detective on the case.

Keith Stevens: A lot of times when a shooting first happens, the media and other people, it's a very hot topic for a minute. Then people go about their business and it just starts to dissipate, and people start to forget about it. A lot of times, some of the story comes up later and oh, well that's why that guy got shot. He's a dirty so-and-so, and then people kind of justify it. This circumstance where two teenage kids doing what teenage kids do. They were here enjoying themselves - good, clean, wholesome kids. Every parent's nightmare, every parent's nightmare. So that's where I think that really sent those shockwaves out.

John Craigle: 25 years ago, it's still hitting me like a ton of bricks, you know?

Amy Donaldson: John Craigle was Zach's photography teacher at Highland High School.

John Craigle: When you hear, you know, I knew that somebody had been killed. You hear his name, and the person who died was, and then this bombshell gets dropped on you. Some of the kids there, you know, those kids who knew him were just shell shocked. I mean, there were kids crying in the halls, and it would come out of nowhere, just like me right now, you know? It would come out of nowhere. You realize what we've lost and how much we were gonna' miss him.

Amy Donaldson: Zach, as John remembers, loved nature shots, mountains, flowers, the intricacies of tree roots.

John Craigle: You know, so when I heard he was taking pictures of the moon the night he was killed, it made sense. We'd actually gone over that in class.

Amy Donaldson: Zach had even joined a trip John organized for a small group of students to go to Europe that summer for sightseeing and photography. So John was able to get to know him more as a person.

John Craigle: And I said, this is a kid that I really, I really thought a lot of. I knew I could count on him. I knew he could help other people, you know, without my asking him to. You know, he was just that kind of a guy.

Amy Donaldson: Sydney said it was easy for people to see themselves or their child in her brother's place.

Sydney Snarr: You know, you've got this nice kid who something so horrible happened to and it was just such a random act of violence, that I think a lot of people were like, that could have happened to us. That could have been anyone. Why him?

Amy Donaldson: Back in the 90's, random shootings were rare. It was a time when many people had no experience with that particular kind of terror.

Sydney Snarr: And it was one of those things where people were saying, hold your children close tonight and just be grateful.

Amy Donaldson: The family was not able to see Zach's body right away, because it was considered evidence in the criminal case. More than a week after his death, they were allowed to prepare him for a funeral.

Sydney Snarr: That was really hard. I remember the coroner telling us not to touch his head because it was unstable with how the bullet had entered and exited the body. They kept saying just don't touch the head because it's too fragile. And I remember just being, like, horrified by that. I remember going to pick out the casket. And they had some like pink caskets and there was one with like an animal print. And I remember thinking how Zach would think that was funny. And I said to my mom, oh my gosh, Zach would just die if we pick this one. And I remember my mom saying, do you want to rephrase that? And it was not funny and it was suddenly where I just burst into tears because, you know, I had said something so stupid and like and it was just like, oh my gosh, I can't believe I just said that. That's how sensitive everyone was at that time. It was just you know, everyone was walking on eggshells around us, we were walking on eggshells around each other. Everything was painful.

Amy Donaldson: In addition to their own grief, Sydney says they had to face many friends and neighbors also trying to come to grips with the shocking nature of the crime.

Sydney Snarr: The night before the funeral, we had a viewing and, I mean, it ended up being hours and hours and hours long. And I remember just having to comfort everyone else, like it was just such a heavy load for my little family to carry.

Newscaster:(at the funeral) It was a bonding like this neighborhood has never seen before. 1500 people, some who didn't even know Zachary Snarr packed into the Edgemont LDS ward house to pay tribute to what they call a remarkable family and a remarkable gifted young man whose life was wasted in a senseless shooting.

Brother: (At the funeral) I look so forward to embracing my brother. I look forward to the resurrection of the just. That will be a tremendous day for my whole family.

Sydney Snarr: (At the funeral) We love you all so much. Even those that we don't know, we love you. We love you so much. You have held us together these many days that have been so hard on us.

Amy Donaldson: Just a day after the shootings, police arrested the killer. He was only a few months older than Yvette and Zach. He confessed to the crime in a police interview, which I'll share with you in another episode. But at the time, the Snarrs could only piece together his motives from what they gathered in news reports. They were left with no satisfying answers as to why anyone would want to take Zach's life. Under pressure from the media, the Snarrs agreed to hold a press conference. Three days after Zach was killed, all five of them squeezed together on one sofa, their arms wrapped around one another. But they could not protect each other from the grief and anger that would destroy the life they knew.

Sy Snarr: (News clip from 1996) If he had to die, I wish it would have been an accident because it would have been a lot easier to accept than this. I will never understand what happened to him. It was brutal. It was violent. It was senseless and I will never understand it. I will never accept it.

Sydney Snarr: (News clip from 1996) This man has taken so much away from us. We can't even call him a person. He's an animal.

(Dramatic Pause)

Sy Snarr: George? Hi, George. How are you? I'm good. It's so good to hear from you. I've wondered, I've been wondering if you got your vaccine yet.

Amy Donaldson: Sy Snarr wasn't sure she'd ever know the kind of joy that she took for granted before Zach was killed. Then two and a half years ago, she received a letter that changed everything. And it led to these Monday morning phone calls that she waits for with nervous anticipation.

Sy Snarr: But oh, I was gonna tell you, I got an invitation to your niece's wedding. What a gorgeous couple, wow! Yeah, we're gonna go. That's so nice of them. We're excited. Have you heard anything about when visitations are going to open up down there, if it is, or when?

Amy Donaldson: She asks him if he's getting her letters. She hopes to get another from him. She advises him to spend as much time in the sunshine as possible. She talks about her wilting wildflowers, her affection for her grandchildren, and an upcoming trip.

Sy Snarr: But yeah, you should, I hope you get it today. I did write to you. I waited till after Easter Sunday because we went with Syd's family to Bear Lake. We had just the best time. We took our bikes, went bike riding and...

Amy Donaldson: The man on the other end of the line is both the reason her life was nearly consumed by anger and the reason she's found peace. His name is Jorge Benvenuto, although friends and family call him George,

Sy Snarr: You should be getting it. And I'm so glad you called. It's so great to hear from you.

Amy Donaldson: He's calling from the Central Utah Correctional Facility.

Sy Snarr: Oh, I will and you'll hear all about it, too. I'll tell you all about it for sure.

Amy Donaldson: And he's the man who murdered her son.

Sy Snarr: Thanks. Thanks for calling. Love you. Bye.

Amy Donaldson: These days we become all too familiar with stories about random acts of violence. Before we've even had the chance to process one terrible story, another more shocking crime appears in our newsfeed. We tend to focus on the part that terrifies us. As a crime reporter, I did just that on a daily basis. I've spent my career talking about how lives are undone by violence. This is the story of how they are remade.

Amy Donaldson: Next time on The Letter...

Yvette Rodier: There's no reason I should be here. He reloaded his gun and aimed at my head to make sure I died.

Amy Donaldson: ...the story of Yvette Rodier, the survivor.

Andrea Smardon: Hi, I'm producer Andrea Smardon dropping in to let you know about some bonus content. This week, we're offering up an inside look into how Amy found out about this story and why she wanted to share it. You can get all the bonus content and some great things we couldn't fit into the main story by subscribing to Lemonada Premium. You can subscribe right now in the Apple Podcast app by clicking on our podcast logo, and then click the subscribe button.

Amy Donaldson: The Letter is researched and reported by me, Amy Donaldson. It's written by myself and Andrea Smardon, who is also responsible for production and sound design. Mixing by Trent Sell.

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Andrea Sardon: With KSL Podcasts, executive producer Sheryl Worsley, for Lemonada Media, executive producers Jessica Cordova Kramer and Stephanie Wittels Wachs and executive producers Paul Anderson and Nick Panella with Workhouse Media.

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