



Protecting Kids In School Shootings

Tizzie Nuss
Founder, The Spark Project

EPISODE 25

[Quote]

“My parents didn't talk to me about lockdown drills. Parents now may feel the same way being tasked with it now - how do we bring this up with our kids?”

[Intro]

Jaison Dolvane: The recent Boulder, Colorado shooting once again has America considering what if anything can be done to improve gun safety. Over 20 years since the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, there are more than 248,000 children at 258 schools that have experienced these unspeakable acts of violence, according to a Washington Post database.

Mass shootings shake our sense of safety and our immediate reaction is to erect fences, barriers, metal detectors and video cameras. This has spawned a \$2.7 billion school security industry, and it drives calls for see-through backpacks, shields, bulletproof vests, armored whiteboards and armed teachers.



Back in the 1950s, students went through "duck and cover" drills in anticipation of a nuclear bomb blast. Today, students in K-12 classrooms go through regular school lockdown drills. Lockdown drills, required in most states in the US and in Canada, are a response to school shooting events. Tizzie Nuss asks "Why are kids and teachers not being protected at schools as part of lockdown drills rolled out across the country?"

Tizzie struggled to process this question. In 2017, Tizzie lost her eyesight for a few days, and during this dark time figured out that her mission had to be to help protect kids. Fueled by faith, the topic of school shootings ignited Tizzie and she created the Spark Project in 2018. Over the next 2 years she would develop her patent pending SPARK™ Shield - a lightweight, bullet resistant, usable school folder that easily transports in and out of backpacks.

In this episode, we talk to Tizzie about the subject of school shootings and the noble cause she is undertaking to introduce SPARK Shield to children, schools and parents. Tizzie started her career in education working for the YMCA of Central Ohio. Her love for people eventually drew her to Human Resources where she worked alongside brilliant minds at companies like Honda, Battelle, and IGS Energy.

[Episode]

JAISON DOLVANE: Okay, welcome Tizzie.

TIZZIE NUSS: Hi, thank you so much for having me.

JAISON DOLVANE: It's my pleasure. So Tizzie, this is a very current topic you know, with the unfortunate shootings that we've actually seen recently in Boulder, Colorado, again. Tell me, you know, how did you sort of find your way to solving this particular problem?

TIZZIE NUSS: Well, this is you know, a very complex problem and I did not ever think this would be a place I'd be sitting right now talking to you about, but kind of go back a little bit. I started my career thinking I was going to be a teacher, my mom's a retired teacher and my stepdad's retired principal. And so I've always loved education and working with kids for the YMCA of central Ohio. And it was my love for people, I ended up moving into HR and worked for a number of different companies.

While I was at one of those companies, me and two other colleagues worked

one day at lunch and were talking about school shootings. And this was probably at least five years ago at this point. And as a mom, I was like, gosh, this is just a really horrible thing that our kids are facing. But immediately that kind of like mama bear instinct was like, why do our kids have these drills? And there isn't anything that we're doing to step in and protect them. And so it was just like ignited in me, fast forward me and these two other guys, we started to work on this. Like, what could we do? Could we create something?

And we started down a path and then we all left the company we're working for. And I'm still felt very pulled that I needed to do something. But honestly, at that point in my life, I did not see myself as the person who could bring this idea that we had to live or let alone do it on my own. I do feel like God kept calling me and giving me different signs and it wasn't until October of 2017 I got my last sign that I knew without a doubt, God was calling me to do this work.

And it was really traumatic. It was, I actually woke up and my eyesight was really foggy one day. And as the day wore on, I actually lost my eyesight for two days. And it was the scariest thing ever. Wondering if I was going to see my kids face, my husband's face again. And I knew I prayed and prayed, and I was just like, please, if I can get my eyesight back, I would never ever question, can I do this? Is this what I'm here for? And so thankfully when I got my eyesight back, I got to work. And that day from October 5th of 2017, I did not question my purpose and that, you know, God would put the right people in front of me to help me make this happen.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. So was it just that, you know, you were already doing this and that particular sort of incident kind of amplified that feeling that you had, or was there something else that you were doing that kind of came to you at that point in time?

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, so I was still working in human resources and I would have these different signs. Like I know it's going to sound crazy, but you know, one day my kids were watching cartoons or something and the TVs flipped over to meet the press or something. And I wouldn't normally have that on. And I think, you know, Hillary Clinton was talking about gun violence and all the lights in my house started going on and off. And I was like, oh my gosh, like I have to do something about this.

And so that day when I woke up on October 5th, when my eyesight was really blurry, kind of like a fog delay, I thought, oh my gosh I'm supposed to meet this guy at work. And he's really religious. I bet God wants me to like talk to him and tell him about what I want to bring this thing to life and believe me, I know that sounds crazy. And the fact that like ego sets in, like, I know what God wants me to do, like talk to that person. And you know, so I go to work, and I talked to this gentleman and he said, Tizzie everything okay with you? And I'm like, my eyesight is really blurry, but you know, I feel like I need to tell you something that I haven't really shared with many people that I feel like God's calling me to do.

And he was like, hold on a second. And I had not told him anything. And he's like, I feel like you're going to talk to me about safety. I was like, oh my gosh. Like, I mean, I just broke down in tears and, you know, we had this really great conversation and you know, that ego kind of setback in where I was like, check, like I just talked to the guy about it and I shared all the things I want to do. And as the day went on, my eyesight got worse and I ended up in the ER, they couldn't figure it out. I ended up not sleeping the entire night, all this pain set in and went to a specialist the following day. And they were like, you know, you have this really bad infection in both eyes. I knew how I contracted it. They didn't know how, and I know that sounds crazy, but like, for me, that's what it took for God to get my attention. And for me to know that, like, this is what I'm supposed to do. It's really challenging. It's really even tough to talk about, let alone thinking about how was I going to do this, but it is what I needed, it's what I needed to know that, you know, I didn't have to wake up anymore and say, what am I supposed to do on here on this earth? Am I contributing? And I'm making an impact.

Now, it was just like, okay, like, thankfully I got my eyesight back and now I have to figure this out and I have to find people to help me do it.

JAISON DOLVANE: Wow. You know, it's so difficult to sort of listen to some of these things and believe in them and then be able to act on them. So it seems like you're doing all of those, so good for you.

TIZZIE NUSS: Thank you. I really feel like, then when I leaned in and I accepted that this is what I'm supposed to do.

JAISON DOLVANE: What did you learn? I mean, this is something that you've never done before. What did you learn about this industry? Cause you know, obviously in even the intro, I mean, in the few minutes that I spent kind of researching some of this you know, I was really surprised to hear how much money is being spent around school security and all sorts of things that you know, protection that's being developed. So tell me kind of like, you know, what did you learn?

TIZZIE NUSS: Yeah. You did great research. I mean, I just was immediately, like I have to create something. I knew I wanted it to be something that kids could carry, that it would be lightweight. But as a parent, this is tough. It's tough for us as adults for us to talk about it. How do we do this in a way where we bring a child into the conversation? I mean, they're already having these drills.

And so I wanted kids to not feel scared. I wanted them to feel empowered. And so what I learned through this process is a lot and some of the things, one, the ballistics industry is very confusing. So what I didn't realize is if you went and purchased something on the market, there really isn't any oversight from the national Institute of justice. And it's really up to that company to do their due diligence and do some testing.

But as a consumer you may not know that, and you may not be asking that question. I also was surprised, it just, I mean, the fact is the majority of school shootings that happen. Somebody knew something and they didn't tell anyone. And so I wrote notes. Like we really have to figure out how can we talk about this too? Like we put a ton, I put so much time and energy into creating this product with care and love and how can, you know, kids be brought into it.

And at the same time, like how do we take an active role in talking about this? Because it's so complex. And I think we're all trying to figure out, like I didn't grow up with this. And so my parents didn't talk to me about lockdown drills, you know? And so now I feel like this generation and people that are parents now may feel the same way that we now are tasked with like, how do we bring this up to our kids? And then they see all this stuff on the TV and it's really hard. It's hard being a parent, just period.

JAISON DOLVANE: What would you say to kids? I mean, you know, do you

have any thoughts in terms of, you know, how parents should go about having this discussion?

TIZZIE NUSS: Well, I do. And I'm certainly not an expert, but I'm passionate about helping find the people to help us with these conversations. One, kids are already having these drills and the first thing we don't want is to scare them. And make them be fearful. I think what we want is for our kids to be prepared. And so I think it's important to really engage the school and people in the community to help. So depending on where you go to school, your school might send out, you know, an email ahead of time to say, this is what we're going to do or whatever. And in some cases, you know, that may not happen. And so for me, with my own kids, you know, they know I've been working on this, but I'm like, this is there for you to use as, you know, a folder, you can decorate it and personalize it, make it your own. But when you have those drills, I want you to make sure that you've grab that, and you have it.

You know, I've had parents say my son like, feels so much safer now that he has this and that is like music to my ears because I can't imagine what it's like to be a kid right now. I know it's hard enough to be a parent, but you know, our kids have so much that they're dealing with, especially now coming with COVID in so much isolation.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right, right. But Tizzie, this is a difficult discussion to have with your children. I mean any sort of advice as to, you know, what are some of the words that we should be using? Especially given that, you know, really, it's kids are different ages, right. So, I mean, you know, myself, I've got an 8 year old and I've got a 13 year old and I've got one in the middle. So, I mean, it seems like you've got to use different words possibly to discuss this with these children. Any thoughts on those?

TIZZIE NUSS: You know what, I'll answer this in two ways. One is you're the parent and you're going to have to know what's best because every single kid is different. My ten-year-old is going to be different than someone else's ten-year-old. And so we as parents are always tasked with like, how do we have this conversation with my son who's 13? Like I learned this at some point that like, when you sit next to a boy, like it's easier for them to open up. I don't know. Like, I learned that at some point, and I've done this with my son, like when he has something on his mind, instead of sitting across from him, I'll sit next to him. And so that's just a little trick that for me, as a

parent that has worked. Like I said, I can't remember where I heard it, but you know, I want kids to just feel like they can talk, and they can be open. They have so much going on. And so that's where I feel like the spark project is going.

So, you know, we want to help create some of these resources for parents. And recently I just met someone in the mental health space who is agreed to help us. So these are things that are coming, that I'm excited about to provide to our community.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. But do you just tell them, do you just say it as it is? Do you just tell the kids that, you know, this is because bad people that have guns and it's to protect you guys.

TIZZIE NUSS: I mean, they already know why they're doing it. You know what I mean? It's not like we're breaking some secret. We're now doing something real tangible to put [11:51 inaudible] in that, that scary thing.

JAISON DOLVANE: That's right. So what you're saying is they've probably figured it out and us dancing around is probably not helping too much.

TIZZIE NUSS: No, I don't think so. But like I said, I think everybody has to do what they think is right. For me, it's like, I want them to know like, Hey, I know you do these drills. I mean, my daughter came home to me one day and said, hey mom, we had that drill today. And I was like, huh, I wish I would've known that. And I said, well, how did it go? And she was like, well, good. Some of us went over here and I hid behind a coat and I was like, oh man, like, that coats not going to potentially save your life. So we have to do better. And I think, you know, we're about figuring out how to make it better, because I think it's just super complex. And there's a lot of strong feelings about how to address it. And I'm just starting here.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. Okay, so tell me about here. You've kind of referred to the product that you actually have with your shield. Give us just kind of like a description of what it is and how would a child actually use it.

TIZZIE NUSS: Yeah. So as I mentioned before, I wanted it to make sure whatever I created was one, really lightweight and two, something that was functional and that kids could, you know, carry but also make their own. So the spark shield has a number of components. One is, it's lightweight, but it's

also, it can double as a folder. So kids can carry papers. They might be able to put their phone. Some people can fit their iPad in there. And that the front has like a clear panel if you will. And the purpose of that being clear is so that kids can display any sort of like maybe decoration or artwork. So it feels personal to them. There's also handles that are on the back. They're not very obvious, but they're there in case that emergency that we never hope happens, if that happens, that their hands are not exposed.

JAISON DOLVANE: And so what do they do? Do they put this on their chest? Do they hold it up? Like, how do they actually use this?

TIZZIE NUSS: Yeah, they would, you know, they would crouch down, and they would hold it over their head and over, you know, their heart because, you know, they're small and it would be that thing. So like when they're hiding, you know, which I hate to even think about, but they do those drills and they're in those positions, it's their tool. And the other instructions that, you know, they're given.

JAISON DOLVANE: How big is this?

TIZZIE NUSS: It is, I can show you right here. Like a size of a folder.

JAISON DOLVANE: But bigger than that. So like probably like maybe like a 11 by something. Yeah. So just a bit bigger than like a big piece of paper, right?

TIZZIE NUSS: Oh yeah. Yeah.

JAISON DOLVANE: Okay, great. So have you talked to schools about this? You know, tell us about sort of you know, any examples of where this might be used right now?

TIZZIE NUSS: So I actually, we just barely launched. I Last February left my career in human resources for this, it was me following another sign. And in that same week, we launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise money. And then a few weeks later COVID happened, we were very fortunate even through COVID to still raise over \$27,000 to one, help us produce the very first round of these as well as people pre-order them. So last year was all about raising money and also starting to produce them. And so we have our first, you know, customers, or if you will, I like to think of our spark community that have got these now in their hands and the hands of

their children. And so I'm getting feedback and longer-term definitely is how do we work with schools and how do we create this forum that I kind of talked about earlier? You know, how do we bring together our educators, our first responders, law enforcement and parents as part of this conversation and bring awareness and figure out how we can help as the spark project.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. Okay. So have you, I mean, have you spoken with any schools yet in terms of like, you know, just the thought of, I mean, it seems like something that can be used to equip all kids or maybe schools should just have a bunch of these.

TIZZIE NUSS: I know, I know that would be so great. Wouldn't it? I've had a conversation with one school that was really, really great. And it went really well. It was in the middle of COVID and I got really great feedback. The only problem was they felt so overwhelmed with COVID and trying to manage that with their students. They didn't feel like they could tackle this next thing, but they were like, we want this conversation to stay open and we also want you to come back next school year.

JAISON DOLVANE: Okay. And what are some of the other alternatives in the marketplace today? Cause I mean, I looked at it, I was surprised in terms of like, you know, armored whiteboards and, you know, they're putting in sort of armored doors and things like that. I mean, did you run across some of these things in your research?

TIZZIE NUSS: I have a little bit, I was so honestly focused on bringing this to life, I didn't allow myself to get super distracted. Of course I did some research, but I was like, what I want is not to just be this like cold backpack insert that just sits in the backpack. And there's a whole host of things that can come up. Some kids don't, can't have their backpack on them. And so I didn't want it to just be that I wanted kids to be able to be a part of it in some way and it to have a functionality to it. So it wasn't something they were just going to forget about it. So I did not see anything like that. And so that's as well as with the handles and that's why I was like, you know, I was just really focused on like, not being like, I really felt like, can I just move faster every day.

JAISON DOLVANE: Got it. So what did you, I mean, you know, in terms of actually creating something like this you know, what are the challenges involved?

TIZZIE NUSS: That's such a good question. And I feel like there's so many. One is my first challenge was how do I help somebody like help me create something that's in my head. So I found a product development company. They helped me kind of come up with some of the design ideas. Then the biggest thing, the biggest win is I was introduced to a gentleman who is a ballistics expert. And at the time he was working at the Ohio state university and with his help, that changed everything because he has this incredible background of understanding the ballistics industry, understanding the types of materials that are out there definitely like understands the national Institute of justice, the type of testing we needed to go through.

And with his help, he is just guided me so much throughout this entire process, which was huge. I needed somebody like that to help us find that material and then go through tons and tons of testing. But challenges. I mean, there are challenges just bringing a product to market, let alone a product that you know, it has a lot of weight, you know, I feel a lot of pressure.

JAISON DOLVANE: Well, there's some really, I'm assuming there's some pretty stringent requirements around it.

TIZZIE NUSS: Well, like I said there is no oversight by the national Institute of justice. We went through and test it in accordance with the standards that exist, which was really, really important. And we do a ton of testing. We did a ton of testing leading up to it, but then as well as when we just produced our first round, we did additional testing and sending it to a national independent lab. And so, you know, it's exciting, exciting to be here and have it. It's like, it's here, it's alive. And now it's the next set of challenges, right? Like anybody who owns a business, you just try to just keep continuing to take the next step forward.

JAISON DOLVANE: Right. Yeah, no, I hear you. So Tizzie, I ask this question to a lot of my podcast guests you know, is there a one feeling that you have that as a mom that you would rather not?

TIZZIE NUSS: Oh my gosh. I love that question. Yeah, I wish I didn't have mom guilt. Don't know if anybody's said that yet.

JAISON DOLVANE: I hear that fairly often.

TIZZIE NUSS: You hear, does anybody say dad guilt?

JAISON DOLVANE: No. I mean, actually I've had quite a few, I've had a few dads on here, but no, I haven't heard that one yet.

TIZZIE NUSS: Why isn't that a thing? It is mom guilt, right?

JAISON DOLVANE: It's true. It's true. Yeah. So what do you feel guilty about?

TIZZIE NUSS: Like you said, you've had other moms on there. I think as moms, we juggle a lot. I'm not saying dads don't, don't get me wrong. I just think we're always trying to figure out like balance and is balance really a word. And am I present when I'm with my kids and am I doing enough? And it's just this like, for me in my head of like, you know, moving this forward with the spark project, how are things with my son? Who's now a teenager. What about my daughter? And you know, how is she doing? And I just, it's something that I work on because I do carry that with me. And if I had like this magic wand and you could just wave it over my head and it would disappear, that would be great.

JAISON DOLVANE: You just feel like you're not doing enough for everyone.

TIZZIE NUSS: Yes.

JAISON DOLVANE: And you guys do so much. So it's crazy and you're right. Dads probably do less. And we don't have that much guilt.

TIZZIE NUSS: I was like, can I say that? Is that going to be like totally wrong. But like, I think dads have a way of just like letting things roll. And I love that about dads. I wish that I, I don't have that quality. I will like pick it apart and be like I did, did I do enough? And I don't think that that's healthy. And I think that it's something that us moms can work on, but it's just the reality. I think like it's the way we're wired.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Yeah, no, you're absolutely right. You're right. So you know, you've gone through this journey, it seems like you're about a year in to maybe two years into this project right now, you know, are you experiencing some sort of change? Do you feel like this is kind of transforming you in any way?

TIZZIE NUSS: Yeah. Well, I mean, I would say the biggest transformations happened one when I lost my eyesight. I mean, it was, I mean, it changed the whole trajectory of my life, you know, everything I do now, I'm so in tune to this like, I feel like the signs that are put in front of me or the people.

And then being able to step into this, I think I mentioned earlier, I didn't have the confidence to feel like I could do this. And I certainly felt like there has to be somebody better to take this on. Like more qualified. And as I sit here today, I mean, I feel just really energized by the amount of people that support us. And I mean, why wouldn't a mom step in, you know, we love our kids. And so why wouldn't a mom step in and say, no, like, I don't know how we're going to solve this. This is super complex, but we have to do better for our kids right now.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, yeah, no, I hear you. Tizzie, what would your hope be for your audience? I guess it's children you're serving right. Or children in schools and parents. I mean, it's all of those people, right?

TIZZIE NUSS: It's all of them. And my hope is that we, as a community can, I mean, really focus on how do we handle this? Because it's so complex and there's so many opinions and so many ideas about right and wrong. And what I found is that like, one thing everyone can agree on is that our kids deserve to be safe first and foremost. And so let's take a step forward and protect them right now. And then we have to continue to move to the next step, but I'm focused on like one step and then the next step, because it is so complex, it feels overwhelming. I mean, I'm overwhelmed, everybody's overwhelmed. And my hope is that, you know, we can continue to grow this community. And, and I know that parents, I mean, we all care so much about our kids and being a parent is hard. And so if there's anything that we can do, my hope is that we can you know, make kids feel a little safer, make parents feel not so worried when they put them on the bus. I mean, those are really high aspirations of mine, but on the forefront of my mind.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah. Yeah. No, absolutely. Do you feel, I mean, obviously this is one sort of solution, or at least it's a tool to help increase the safety of our children. What are your opinions about, you know, everything else that needs to get done around this?

TIZZIE NUSS: That's such a good question. I mean, it honestly feels like so much commotion if I'm being, you know what I mean? Like, it just feels like there's so much, I think that no matter where you are, you can take a stand and help in some way. Whether it's you engage in a conversation with your school to say, can we talk about these drills and what's going on at my kid's school? Or maybe you're somebody who's passionate about something else. I just, I think it's less about judging where everybody decides to take a role, but just let everyone take an active role.

JAISON DOLVANE: That's a very interesting point. You know, obviously I'm in Canada. And we have lockdown drills in our schools over here. Same way that, you know, you've got across all the states in America and you know, they locked the schools now and you've got to kind of ring a bell and be let in to get into the school. And, you know, I just don't know if I've ever actually had a chat with them in terms of what goes out on these lockdown drills and what else are they actually doing. It sort of feels reactive. So, you know, the point that you're making is just parents getting engaged and asking questions is a really good step in the right direction.

TIZZIE NUSS: Absolutely. And in coming out a place of just asking is so great. And you might have a parent who's a little bit more passionate to say, I would like to help in some way, I'm sure you know, regardless of what school it is. I mean, our schools have been through so much already, you know, and they always have limited resources. And so finding people that are passionate to help them some way, I mean, I can't imagine that they would be turned away.

JAISON DOLVANE: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So I have last question for you. So why did you guys name it the spark project?

TIZZIE NUSS: I love this question. This is a great story too. So I remember I told you like five plus years ago when this was brought up with these two gentlemen, what was one of those gentlemen while we were talking about, could we do this and what would it look like? I was sitting at this high top table at a restaurant and there was like a light right above us. And I was talking about the vision of like, where could this go? And, you know, some really great ideas about wanting kids to be a part of the process and it not being scary. And [27:19 inaudible] talking about some of these things, like right above the guy's head was having lunch with, there was like, this like speck of dust that like lit on fire. And I was like, I looked at it, it was like for

the shortest amount of time.

And I was like, oh my gosh. Like, and he was like, did you just see that? And I was like, oh my gosh, you saw it. He's like, yeah. It was like the speck of dust that like lit on fire. And I was like, oh my gosh. I thought I just like, had totally lost it. And so we just continued our conversation. Well, over the course of the few weeks we were talking about like, what would we name what we're doing? Like, what would this be? And it was him having a conversation with someone else. And they were like, well, you guys should be the spark project.

JAISON DOLVANE: okay. That was the inspiration.

TIZZIE NUSS: Yeah. And then, so, you know, that was so long ago, but I love that you asked me cause I haven't really been able to share that. I haven't really shared that story yet.

JAISON DOLVANE: Very cool. Yeah. You know, there's always a trigger somewhere for some of these things. Great. Well, thank you so much, Tizzie. It's been great having you here.

TIZZIE NUSS: Thank you so much for having me. It's been so great spending time with you.

[Outro]

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