

Transcript: EP 327 - Are You the Victim in Your Own Story? How to Overcome Trauma with Somali Pirate Kidnapping Survivor, Jessica Buchanan

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Dr. Taz: Hi everyone, and welcome to Super Woman Wellness. I'm Dr. Taz. I've made it my mission throughout my career in integrative medicine to support women in restoring their health using a blend of eastern medical wisdom with modern science. In this show, I will guide you through different practices to find your power type and fully embody the healthiest and most passionate version of you. I'm here for you and I can't wait to get started. This is a Soul Fire production.

Welcome back everyone. Welcome back to another episode of Super Woman Wellness, where we are determined to bring you back to your super-powered self. And if you've been listening to the show for a while, you know that I'm a huge believer in multiple bodies. I'm not going crazy, but I do believe that there's an energetic, emotional, mental, and physical body along with your social body. They all connect, they communicate, and they impact who we are in the world. That's why this topic is so important. We are breaking down the topic of trauma and talking to Jessica Buchanan, who is a teacher, author, humanitarian, and a survivor. She's been named one of the 150 women who will shake the world by Newsweek. And her story was the most highly viewed 60 minute episode to air to date. She's highly sought after inspirational speaker and her TEDx, Pearl Street Talk: Change is Your Proof of Life, has been the foundation for which she travels the world. Inspiring audiences to access the resilience by identifying their own autonomy and chance in the middle of their own life-changing events.

She works as a family liaison volunteer for a non-profit organization hostage US. And she supports former hostages and their families during captivity and eventual return. And also continues to serve as a dedicated ambassador for the Navy SEAL Foundation, which works to support families of fallen seals. She has a recent book, Deserts to Mountaintops: Our Collective Journey to (re)Claiming Our Voice. Jessica, I am thrilled to welcome you to the show. You are a survivor, you've been through trauma. Maybe educate the audience a little bit on your story. And then I really do want to get back to how you've changed your story, how you've changed that experience to be one that has directed you moving forward. So tell us what happened.

Jessica: Well, thank you first of all for having me on. It's a pleasure to be here. So I am a teacher by profession. And when I was finishing up my student teaching in Nairobi, Kenya, the school that I was working at offered me a full-time position teaching fourth grade. So that was many moons ago. But I took it and I started working at this international school. It was just amazing, just an all around amazing professional and personal experience. I met my husband shortly thereafter, this cute Swedish guy in a nightclub one night. I'd never met anybody from Sweden before, so I thought he was especially exotic. And we fell in love. We got married. And then about a year and a half later, I moved up to Northern Somalia with him where he was working in international development. He is the equivalent of a human rights lawyer essentially.

And again, I'm a teacher, so I quit my job and I figured I'll land on my feet. Teachers always find work, which is exactly what happened. I started just teaching English lessons to refugees that were living and working on the compound that I was staying on. And that folded into working for the Ministry of Education in the country and then working for non-governmental organizations where I found myself on October 25th, 2011. I was working for the Danish D Mining group, which was the Mine Action Unit of the Danish Refugee Council. I was their education advisor regionally. So I traveled all over the Horn of Africa, Sudan, Rwanda, all over Somalia. And basically breaking down the mind risk education and armed violence reduction in community safety components into things that little kids could actually understand because these are very technical topics. And they had a whole portfolio of services that they offered.

But I was in charge of education training the staff at all the field offices. And then they would go out into the villages, and educate, and help keep kids safe essentially. A lot of the communities that we worked in were post conflict, post civil war. There were still a lot of explosives and things laying around. And so it felt like really meaningful saving work at times. It wasn't every teacher's dream to go work in Somalia, but it definitely scratched that itch for me. I felt like I was having fun. It was an adventure and I was making a difference. And so, in October of 2011, I was on a field mission in the southern part of Somalia with a colleague, a Danish gentleman named Paul that I knew very well. We were friends. I didn't feel good about the trip. And I canceled it twice before, which is important to note that my intuition, my intrinsic knowing was telling me like, there's something going on here. This isn't right. And I ignored it.

And I actually canceled it two times prior. Then I called him and I said, "Look, I don't feel good about this. Let's figure something else out." And he was of the mindset that I needed to come down because it was my job. We needed to be in

solidarity with our staff, all of those things. And he was right largely. But I also had this gut feeling that something was off. But what do you do, right?

Dr. Taz: Right.

Jessica: You've already canceled it twice before. This is your job, this is what you signed up for. If you're not going to do it, somebody else is going to. So I got on a UN plane, I went down to the southern part of Somalia. The training was three days. I got through the first two days. It was fine. Everything went great. But what I was worried about was that third day, because we actually had to move from one location to the next. And if something's going to happen, usually it's going to happen when you're in transit, right?

Dr. Taz: Interesting.

Jessica: So I've taken all the HEAT trainings, the hostile environment awareness trainings. I've done all the things. So I know this.

Dr. Taz: Wait, so I'm going to stop you for a second. What is the HEAT training and what is the hostile environment training? Because a lot of people listening may not even have a remote clue of your world at this point.

Jessica: Yeah. So when you're working, you're an expat or a foreigner working in some of these areas that have more heightened and sensitive security, I don't know, environments, I guess, you would participate in these hostile environment awareness trainings, which stands, HEAT is the acronym for it. And mostly they're like first aid training and what to do with, there's an active shooter. There was a small portion of the training that did have to do with being taken hostage and held captive, but it was very small because that doesn't happen very often, hopefully, we hope. Knock on wood. So I had in the back of my mind that, okay, today's the day that we have to move from this office to another office. And that made me feel nervous. And I remember getting up that morning, October 25th, and I'd had nightmares all night long. I just wasn't feeling good about this again, that knowing that gut feeling was coming back.

And I got up and I remember going and looking in the mirror in the bathroom and saying literally out loud to myself, just, do you want to do this? And I knew the answer was no. But I think that that is the moment, probably one of the most important moments of my life, because it is when I made a very intentional decision to abandon myself. And I left the room and never came back. I left that girl standing there because as I walked through the threshold, my life was about to change. The trajectory of it was about to change. And so, we get to the field office, we do our training. It's three o'clock in the afternoon, I'm thinking, great.

Almost there. Home run. I just need to get back to the northern office, get on a plane tomorrow morning, and I'll be home.

And as we're going through in our... We're in a three person caravan. As we're going through town to get to the other field station, our car is overtaken, mud splash up all over our windows and our windshield. And I remember hearing just that we were surrounded by screaming men, essentially screaming in Somali. And a very angry man opens the door next to me. He's wearing a police uniform, he's holding in a brand new shiny AK-47. And he pulls the security guard who's next to me out, slams him onto the ground, puts the gun to my head, and starts screaming at the driver that we need to drive. So we tear off through town and we drive for hours, we stop, we change vehicles. And-

Dr. Taz: What's going on in your head? Well, what's happening to you while this is going on? So the security guard. Your security guard is basically now been thrown out of the car. You're being held hostage by a Somalian police person it seems like. What is happening in your mind at this point? Do you even remember?

Jessica: I mean, I have two very, very basic thoughts. And the first one is that this is bad, this is bad, this is bad. I just remember that being on a loop in my head. There is nothing in my life that has prepared me for how bad this is. No amount of HEAT trainings can prepare you for the terror you're going to feel when an armed gunman climbs into your car and puts a gun to your head. And then the second thing I kept thinking after that loop kind of ended was... Because we were in the car for hours. It was just that no matter what happens from this point out, no matter... And he could kick us out, and we could walk back to town, and they could just take my wallet, and that could be it. But no matter what happens, my life has changed forever. Fundamentally changed.

My belief, I think, in feeling safe in the world and all of that has been fundamentally broken. And I, of course, was not going that philosophical into it at that point, but I just knew that everything had changed. This is that moment when nothing's ever going to be the same again. And I think that people who... I mean, we all are surviving something, we're all experiencing big T trauma, little T trauma, lots of it at different points in our lives. But I think many of us can go back to that moment, even if it's extended periods and exposure to knowing that, yeah, things are never going to be the same again.

And so we ended up driving for hours out into the middle of the night and we're forced out of the vehicle. In order to walk out into the desert and into what I believed was an execution, that was single most terrifying moment thus far of my life. I hope I don't experience anything that terrifying again. And I just remember being ordered to get onto my knees in the middle of the desert thinking I'm an aid

worker. I don't understand. I'm a teacher from Ohio. I do not understand what I did to get here.

Dr. Taz: Are you trying to talk to them? Are you trying to communicate with them at all? No, okay.

Jessica: No, no. No, not at all. I'm just eyes to the ground, following orders like subservient, crying quietly, not sobbing, not screaming, not begging. It was very important to me for some reason to go down and out with dignity. I remember that being a prayer that I was praying to my mom. My mom had passed away the year before. And so, I just felt like she was very close to me in those moments. And I remember asking her to help me just be strong and help me be dignified because really what I was afraid was going to happen was that I was going to be gang raped and then shot. And surprisingly, that's not what happened at all. Instead, as I'm on my knees waiting for a bullet to pierce my brain or them to cut my head off, one of them just says one word, sleep, lay down in the dirt and go to sleep.

And I remember I'm kneeling there and I can't see anything. It's just darkness everywhere. But I know I'm surrounded. I can sense that I'm surrounded by men and there's weapons everywhere. And sleep as they say in English. And I think, okay. And I remember just falling to the ground in such relief in that moment. And it's interesting how your body and your mind start to really work together because it knows it needs to keep you alive and protect you. And I did. I just passed out. Just passed out. And I woke up a couple hours later and it was starting to get light out. I remember just surveying my surroundings and thinking, okay, well I've woken up in the middle of hell.

Dr. Taz: Do we know this was going on in the US? Was there a news report?

Jessica: So there was a little ticker. You know when you got CNN on or something, a little ticker at the bottom? There was a headline that said something at about an American woman being kidnapped in Somalia. And that's all that it said. There's a whole protocol and process to what happens next in terms of someone being held hostage. These are typically long and drawn out ordeals. And so, it doesn't really go into the media in order to keep the hostage safe. And the more talk there is, the more media coverage it gets, the higher the ransom demand will go and the less likely the hostage is to survive.

Dr. Taz: Got it. I did not know that. Okay. Gotcha.

Jessica: I mean, why would you? No one knows these things until you're in the middle of them. I didn't know.

Dr. Taz: So you're now hostage of a group of Somalians. It's day two. What's going on?

Jessica: I'm just trying to figure out what they want. I am observing. I'm trying really hard not to freak out, not have a panic attack. And my colleague, Paul, who was with me at the time, he has been taken as well. So he's there. He's quite a bit older than me, and this was his duty station. So I felt like he had a little better grasp on maybe who these people could be, what clans they belong to, stuff like that. It took us about four or five days to get any information in terms of what they actually wanted. Our biggest fear was that it was Al-Shabaab that had taken us, which they're an Islamic terrorist group. And I felt like being a young-ish, I was 31 when this happened. American woman did not bode well for me if it was. And the leader of the group, a man who called himself Abdy, who finally identified himself. Yeah, got four or five days and said, "No, no, no, we're not Al-Shabaab. We just want money."

It was such a relief when we got that information. So we're thinking, okay, well, great money. Okay, money we can deal with. We knew our organization had kidnapping and ransom insurance. We didn't understand how these things work. Again, they're long, they're drawn out. The kidnapers, they call themselves pirates. I don't know, they're just bad people. Gangsters. But we'll call them pirates for the sake of this conversation. Started their ransom demand at \$45 million because they were typically overtaking big, huge container ships in the Indian Ocean, which they could probably negotiate down to a couple of million dollars. But we were just two people. No amount of trying to reason or rationalize. Whatever make anybody understand that we are not, no one's going to pay. No one's going to pay even a million dollars for us. Our families don't have that money. We're not rich people. I'm a teacher from Ohio.

So besides being terrifying and surreal, it was just extremely frustrating because you're trying to reason with people who have no frame of reference for where you're from or what you have, or access to. And you just felt like arguing with a toddler, like a crazy toddler with a gun all the time.

Dr. Taz: Yeah. Yeah. Scary.

Jessica: Yeah.

Dr. Taz: Super scary.

Jessica: Yeah.

Dr. Taz: Oh my goodness.

Are you walking around with bottles of supplements? Not sure when to take what? Getting really confused by your regimen? I know this, because I get to talk to patients every day in practice who are struggling with the same. And most

importantly, they want something simple, easy to follow, and doesn't require a lot of steps. That's why I love Athletic Greens. When I have a patient that's getting overwhelmed or someone who comes to me and says they want just one thing to do, one simple thing to do. I love recommending Athletic Greens. Athletic Greens is a great way to get your health back on track. For myself and for my patients who are looking to build a better foundation of health, Athletic Greens is my go-to. You take one scoop of Athletic Greens, one, and you're absorbing 75 high quality vitamins, minerals, whole food source, super foods, probiotics, and adaptogens to help you start your day right.

Not only that, we know that Athletic Greens helps and promotes good gut health. Again, this blend of ingredient supports your gut health, your nervous system, your immune system, your energy, recovery, focus, and even anti-aging. I've got patients on this who tell me that their brain fog has never been better after taking Athletic Greens. They feel like new people, and it's so exciting to watch and to listen to. Right now, it's time to reclaim your health and arm your immune system with convenient daily nutrition. It's just one scoop and a cup of water every day. That's it. No need for a million different pills and supplements to look out for your health. To make it easy, Athletic Greens is going to give you a free one-year supply of immune supporting vitamin D and five free travel packs with your purchase. All you have to do is visit athleticgreens.com/Drtaz, that's D-R-T-A-Z. Again, that is athleticgreens.com/Drtaz capital D-R-T-A-Z, to take ownership over your health and pick up the ultimate daily nutritional insurance.

So apparently 93 days go by like this.

Jessica: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Dr. Taz: And you're in the same place, or you being moved from location to location?

Jessica: Yeah, we're being moved from location to location. We were never taken to a house or shelter, so we lived outside the entire time. So I sat under a tree or bush all day, and then I would sleep out in the open on the ground at night. We probably moved 60 times within the course of that whole 93 days.

Dr. Taz: And you're the only woman? Is there another?

Jessica: I'm the only woman.

Dr. Taz: In the whole group of men?

Jessica: Whole group.

Dr. Taz: How many men are we talking about?

Jessica: I mean, it'd be anywhere from six to 30 on any given day or night. There were always people milling about, always very heavily armed, machine guns, explosives. I remember one time being in the Land Cruiser and we were driving to yet another location. And I had been given a bottle of water, so I had tucked it in the front seat, the seat in front of you, how it has a pocket? And I reached in to grab my bottle of water, but instead I pulled out a hand grenade. So I mean, the cars were loaded down with explosives. It was a traveling with a militia. And all it would take was for one of those cars to flip over, and we were all goners. So I mean, I think it's miraculous that all of us even survived some of those drives out in the desert.

Dr. Taz: Goodness. So how do you get rescued? What happens finally?

Jessica: So January 16th, 2012 would be my last of six proof of life calls. I had no idea that it would be my last one. And what a proof of life call is, they drive you out somewhere in some undisclosed area, which is kind of all of it, but put you on a satellite phone. And you answer a series of security questions, because whoever's on the phone is the communicator or the negotiator for your family and your organization. And they need to make sure that the hostage is still alive so that the negotiations can keep moving forward. And they would always ask me, "How are you doing?" And I would say, "I'm not okay. But I'm okay." And this time I said, "I am not okay. I am super, super sick. I have a urinary tract infection. It's moving into a kidney infection. I've asked them to bring me a doctor or some medicine. I know I need an IV. I need to be in a hospital. If you guys don't do something, I'm not going to make it out of here alive."

And so I had no idea what was happening on the other side of things that my husband was fighting so hard. He was working with the FBI. My organization was being cooperative, but a little bit less. My family had come to Nairobi and everybody was there. And that information then was taken to Eric, my husband, who then took it to my doctor in Nairobi. And he said to Eric, "You have to get her out of there. She's going to die. You simply just have to get her out or you're never going to see her again." And Eric's like, "Ah, okay." So he takes the information, he takes what the doctor says to that FBI agent that he's working with, Matt Espenshade, who's like a dear, dear family friend. He's literally one of the only reasons I'm still here.

And Eric recounts that he said it was a scene out of a movie because Matt, and there was another FBI agent in there in the room. When Eric tells him this, he said they both just looked at each other and then they walked out of the room. And he was like, I didn't know what was going to happen, but I knew if something was going to happen right then was when they had decided that it was going to. It had

set the wheels in motion. And so it had, in fact, because there are a series of, oh, I don't know, things that have to happen for a military intervention to actually be considered and take place. One of the things as if the negotiations have stalled to the point where there's no way they're going to move forward.

I'm not sure how they decide that's the situation. Probably length of time. The other thing is if there's a serious imminent death of the hostage, maybe due to illness or the threats from the kidnappers. So I think I was classified in that category. And so it went all the way up to the ranks of President Obama and he gave the order. And so January 24th into the 25th of 2012, in the middle of the night, I had pulled my mat out like I'd done all the other nights before to sleep out in the field. And I was in a lot of pain. I was super, super sick, had a really high fever. And I had woken up a couple hours after I had fallen asleep with a need to be sick.

And so I said the word toilet, which is what I always did to leave my mat. And there were nine guys on the ground that night, and not one of them was awake. Always. Always. At least one of them was awake to keep guard over the camp and to make sure we weren't escaping or something. But this night, everybody was completely passed out. And I said the word toilet a couple of times, and no one will wake up. And my need became too great to just stand there. So I go to my bush, do what I need to do. And in the meantime, I had picked up a small little pen light, like flashlight, and I was flashing it to get light my way to the bush. And then I came back to my mat and rolled myself up in my blanket. And I could hear something. Sounded like something was coming towards us toward the camp. It sounded like an animal or something, because there was grass breaking.

And I thought, okay. We didn't typically deal with animals and stuff out there actually. And I didn't know what it was. I got up, I shook my blanket out, thought maybe it was these bugs that would come out at night. Nothing fell out of my blanket. So I decided I gave up because I needed to sleep. And then about 30 seconds goes by and the night just erupts into automatic gunfire. And the pirate on my left, we called him Helper. We had nicknames for everybody so we could talk about them without them knowing. He was sleeping next to me and I couldn't see anything because it was really, really dark that night. It had clouded over. But I could sense that he was standing next to me and he was terrified. I could sort of make out that he was holding a firearm. And then he's whisper screaming at all of the other guys to wake up, and then they're just being shot and they're dropping to the ground.

And I'm thinking, I'm not going to survive this, am I? I'm really not going to survive. Because I'm thinking we're probably being kidnapped by another group

or something at this point. And I don't have the strength to survive another group. And then I feel somebody grab my arms, my shoulders, and my ankles, and I'm trying to fight back and the blanket is pulled away from my head, and I can sort of make out some figures around me. And I hear this young American man's voice and he says, "Jessica, we're the American military. You're safe now. We're here and we're going to take you home."

Dr. Taz: Oh my gosh.

Jessica: And then all I can say in response is, "You're American? Wait, you're American?" I mean, just over and over like some idiot. I just gotten completely just overwhelmed with shock. I'm shaking uncontrollably. I'm almost convulsing. And he says, "We've been watching you for a long time. We know how sick you've been."

Dr. Taz: Oh my God. Bless you. Goodness gracious. Bless you. So you come home and I'm sure your family was beside themselves, right?

Jessica: Yeah, I participated in the Department of Defense's Hostage Reintegration program. So my reintegration and introduction back to my family was very regimented and very monitored. So I had a five-minute phone call. And at first I was like five minutes? But it was enough. And then when I was reuniting with my husband, it was one hour in the hospital, and that was enough. And then the next day it was lunch. So it was supervised by my psychologist. And I think it was very prudent of me to participate in that. It was completely voluntary, but it did help with the reintegration process.

Dr. Taz: Goodness gracious. So with that backdrop, we're now almost a decade later, more than a decade later from when that happened. How did that affect you moving forward? And what kind of played out after the fact when it came to your life, and your choices, and your feeling of safety and security, your marriage, your health? What was the fallout from that experience?

Jessica: I think fallout is a really good way to put that. My husband and I, our plan was always to stay in Africa and continue working. We wanted to have a family together and we wanted to raise them in Africa. Strangely enough, I did get pregnant right after the rescue, which feels like it was a miracle that it happened. But at the time, it was really hard for me to wrap my brain around. So I get pregnant right away. I'm immediately, I kind of feel like I've been taken hostage in another way. My body feel... Everything is very different. I'm sick all the time. I tried to go back to work in Nairobi. We had a place in Nairobi. And I just couldn't work for the organization. They wouldn't accept responsibility for the part that they played in their negligence in this whole thing happening in the first place.

And then they were going to send me back into the field after I'd had a baby. And I was like, I'm just like, you guys are like, no. No. And then, yeah, that sense of safety was really, really difficult to reclaim. So eventually, about a year after the ordeal, we relocated to the US outside of Washington DC, which is not where I'm from. My husband's not from the States. And we arrived with a container, and a baby, and a lot of trauma. And it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, trying to acclimate to living in a westernized country. And being the girl that was kidnapped. We wrote our first book, Impossible Odds, and my husband and I co-authored that. And it was this big huge media tour. And I've got this baby, and I'm not sleeping, and I've got PTSD, and nightmares.

And I was talking to someone today actually, about that, promoting that book. I felt like I was disassociated the whole time. I was just outside my body for the entire thing. I didn't enjoy anything. I wasn't nervous about anything. I was numb because I was so traumatized. And then that kind of faded into the background and it was like, okay, well what am I going to do now? What do I do now? My purpose was so tied up into my work. That was my identity, and now who am I? And it was dark, and really hard, and super scary. And it did. I was right that day, October 25th, 2011, everything did change. And so I sat out on a journey to find myself again. Who was this girl? What was left of her? What had become of her? What was new about her?

And so yeah, I just kind of started exploring what was I interested in? What sounded good? Let's try that. Let's learn about this. I'm an insatiable reader and learner, and let's go back to school. And I went back to teaching for a little while. And told this story over and over and over again. And I took a break for a while because I just couldn't do it anymore. And then right before the pandemic hit, I started feeling into this newer purpose of... I started a podcast and really practicing using my voice. And really, I felt like for a long time I had been telling the story that everybody wanted to hear. And I spent a lot of time looking at that and where... What part was I playing in that story, and did that feel true to me in my experience? And I realized that there is enough room and a story for there to be more than one hero.

And maybe I could be a hero in this story too. It wasn't just SEAL Team Six that got to be the heroes, which they are absolutely a hundred percent heroes. But I survived that 93 days. And then I chose to survive afterwards. And so, that really set me off on what I'm doing now, which is really working to support and empower women to tell their stories through speaking and through writing. I have a publishing imprint. And we just published our first anthology in January, Desert To Mountaintops: Our Collective Journey to (re)Claiming Our Voice. And had a collection of 25 women's stories of their own desert to mountaintop experience,

and how they've reclaimed their voice in one way or another. And it's very diverse in so many ways. The stories are as different as the women that are telling them.

But I feel for so long, I think I carried around this belief that my purpose had shriveled up and died out in the desert. And it was time then for it to open up into bloom. It hadn't died. It had just gone dormant so I could heal. Because my purpose was about healing in that time. And so, now I think I'm always going to be healing. But I feel very comfortable inviting company into that space now.

Dr. Taz: That's incredible. And you used certain words, you say, "It was my choice to survive those 93 days. It's my choice to tell these stories." How much choice do we have in life events that may seem out of control? What's the differentiator there?

Jessica: I think oftentimes we confuse options with choice. And I think maybe we don't have a lot of options, but we are always going to have a choice.

Dr. Taz: I like that.

Jessica: I didn't have a lot of options in terms of things to do while I was sitting out in the desert, but I had a choice about how I was going to think and what I was going to think about. And I still find that I employ a lot of the same tactics and skills that I used when I was sitting under a tree for 12 hours a day. I employ them in my daily life because it's all about mindset. And I'm a big mindset manifestation, visualization person. No one has visualized freedom more than me, probably.

Dr. Taz: Love it.

Jessica: I walked myself out of that desert.

Dr. Taz: That's awesome.

Jessica: But I think that we confuse those two things, and they're very, very different. Options are external. Choice is very internal.

Dr. Taz: That may be the take home message right here, because I do think so many times we don't realize how in control we are of that choice. Were there moments where you weakened? Moments where you despaired? Moments where you wanted to walk out? And trauma looks different on different people. What did it kind of look like on you when you came out?

Jessica: Yeah, I think that that's an important conversation to have. I realized I was having such a difficult time even years after the kidnapping. And I didn't realize it until I found this book, this obscure book written by this journalist, and it's called *Surviving Survival*. And it goes like... It's an account of all these different people

who have survived things like shark attacks, and shipwrecks, and stuff. So there was nothing very similar to my situation. But at the same time, I felt very acknowledged and seen that the trauma is one survival. And then everything that comes after is its own survival.

And that's why my work and my supporter Hostage US is really important because there's not enough support for people coming out of these former hostage or detainment, being detained by governments when they come home. Not only are they traumatized, but just logistically speaking, their credit has been wrecked because no one could pay their credit card bill or their student loans. They can't get an apartment. They've lost their careers. They've lost their purpose. So I wish there had been someone there to support me. But I figured it out. But I definitely took the long way.

Dr. Taz: Wow. And so Hostage US is an organization you're involved with. Have you had to work with other former hostages as well?

Jessica: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yep.

Dr. Taz: And what do you see with them and their trauma stories? Is there-

Jessica: It's always the same. It's always the same. It's that purpose. We've lost our identity. We believe we've lost our purpose because most of us end up in these situations because we've gone to the ends of the earth doing something we believe in, whether we're journalists, or aid workers, or teachers, or whatever. There has been some sort of internal call that we answered. And that gets taken away from you in a very violent way. And there is so much grief. There's mourning and there's grief. And that has to be given the time that it needs to be given. Just like if you were to mourn the death of a loved one, because it is a duck.

Dr. Taz: Wow. What an incredible story. What would you hope that people hearing your story walk away with? I know you've got a publishing imprint, you've got Deserts To Mountaintops. I think that's an incredible title. I mean, you were held hostage for 93 days in the desert by Somalian pirates, and your trauma is from there. There are many women and men, quite honestly, who experience trauma not to that level, but there's trauma that they're caring. And I think the fact that that options versus choices, I think that's an incredible takeaway that anybody with any type of trauma can try to understand that it is a lot about how you think about a situation, how you're going to assess a situation. What would you say to folks dealing with trauma? What is the lesson you really want to spread?

Jessica: I think that trauma is an invitation. It's an invitation to collaborate on your life's purpose. Somebody I was talking to today was... We were talking about her book

in her trauma, and she was like, "Don't you ever just kind of want to lay it down? Write the book, and get it out there, and then just lay it down, and forget about it?" And I said, "I don't think that's a reality for us." So for me, the only way to make it survivable and manageable is to make it mean something.

Dr. Taz: I love that.

Jessica: Maybe that's part of my personality, part of my upbringing. But it makes getting out of bed in the morning, it gives me something to walk toward instead of something to carry. And you'll be so surprised when you start looking at, if you shift the why did this happen to me, from why did this happen to me, to, all right, I'm ready to examine why this happened.

Dr. Taz: Interesting. I love that. You're so wise. So wise.

Jessica: Well, it's the side effect of spending 93 days in solitary confinement on the desert.

Dr. Taz: Oh, wow. It's like a four silent meditations. Goodness gracious.

Jessica: Sure was. It sure was.

Dr. Taz: And those men were never disrespectful towards you? They treated you okay?

Jessica: I mean, I wouldn't say they treated me okay. I would say I was not sexually assaulted.

Dr. Taz: Okay, got it. Big difference, for sure.

Jessica: Yeah.

Dr. Taz: Wonderful. Well, if anyone listening wants to learn more about you, or your story, or the work you're doing, what's the best way for them to get in touch with you?

Jessica: So I have two websites. One is just jessicabuchanan.com and that will lead you to all of the other things. We do have a separate website, desertstomountaintop.com. And that has information about the new book that just came out. And then we're working on two other anthologies that we are always looking for writers for. And then I hang out on Instagram way too much [@jessicabuchanan](https://www.instagram.com/jessicabuchanan).

Dr. Taz: I'm going to have to check you out on Instagram and definitely get the book as well. This is such inspiring work. What a great story. And for everyone listening, look, I get to see trauma. I see it close up. I see it in your lab work. I see it show up as inflammation. I see it show up as mental health issues. But not when it's reframed like this. When we can take a story, we can turn it around, we can use it for our purpose, and we can really make a difference in the world. So thank you, Jessica, for joining us. I really appreciate it. Everybody else, thank you for taking

time out to join this episode of Super Woman Wellness. Please rate, and review it, and share it with your friends. And I will see you guys next time.