

Invictus Games Radio Podcast: Episode Three- Danielle Daniel

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Pj: Welcome to Invictus Games radio. I'm PJ Kwong. The Invictus Games Toronto 2017 take place September 23rd to 30th and will harness the power of sport to inspire the recovery of wounded, ill and injured servicemen and women. This podcast shines a light on the stories of those competing in the games those surrounding them. Their spirit unconquered.

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Pj: Danielle Daniel is the wife of veteran Dr. Steve Daniel who became paraplegic as a result of a freak accident during his service. Danielle is a wife, mother, artist, and author and illustrator of two, author and illustrator rather, of two children's books as well as her deeply moving memoir about her marriage in the military called *The Dependent*. In this podcast we're going to explore what it means to be a military spouse when your spouse suffers a life-altering injury and where you go from there. If you want to connect with Danielle or find out more about her book, visit: www.danielledaniel.com. Danielle, thanks for joining us.

Danielle Daniel: Thank you for having me.

Pj: This is a treat. Listen I loved your book and I really appreciate the rawness of the accounts in it. I mean, you didn't sugar coat anything. But take us back to the beginning. Tell me about your meeting with Steve, when you got married and did you really understand what you were in for?

Danielle Daniel: Right, no I had no idea. I was in university, in my final year of university, and Steve was just a Private, just starting his career. I don't want to give too much away on how we met, because that is, I think, the best part of the book. But no, I had no idea. But I fell in love and he fell in love and we knew we wanted to make it work. So it was long distance for four years and he did four tours overseas and it happened fast because two weeks after he was married, he left for six months. So there was a lot of time apart right from the beginning.

Pj: Now it's so interesting that you say two weeks after he married. It's actually two weeks after you guys together married, but it's interesting because the focus of your book is very much about how, in some ways, it was two separate lives. I mean I love the fact that you talk about this beloved sleigh bed that you bought.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah.

Pj: And you recount in the that... You spent two years and one month in the sleigh bed or he spent three months and one week in the sleigh bed. So tell me a little about the separateness of being a military spouse. What does that actually mean?

Danielle Daniel: Well I think what it means is you do a lot of growing but, alone. And he grows in his own way because he's, he's you know, overseas and experiencing these things that he'll never truly be able to explain to you and then on the other side, I'm home alone as well and growing and dealing and trying to live my own life. So you grow separately and you spend a lot of the holidays by yourself as well which is hard.

Pj: You made obviously some great friends within the military community it almost sounds like a military family.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: When you're talking about this time alone, because you also went to, was it teachers college?

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: When he went on that first tour after you got married. So did you talk in advance of your marriage, about how you would manage this kind of separate lives?

Danielle Daniel: No. Not really. We just kind of dealt with things as they came and I don't think Steve even knew how much time apart we would spend. He was in the infantry, he was a paratrooper, he spent a lot of time in the field. Even when he wasn't overseas, he did a lot of training out in the field for weeks and sometimes courses where he was away for months. So I don't think he even realized it. So no, we just kind of you know, young and in love hoping it will work, wanting it to work out. And... Yeah that was the reality of it.

Pj: Tell me your favourite memory from your wedding day.

Danielle Daniel: Oh my goodness. I think, you know, when I think back right now... I think it'll be the dance, it's the dance and it's very bittersweet for me because I'll never be able to dance with my husband, you know. The way we did then. Yeah and that's, that's a very strong symbol in the book. It represents the intimacy that, that we lost for a long, long time. But no, it'll never be the same. So I think, I have this video of us dancing and I remember thinking, my goodness, that was such a long song, like I felt bad for the people who had to watch us for that long. But now I'm, I'm happy that it was a long song.

Pj: You know, you talk a lot about before and after.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: Do you think of yourself as being the same person before as after?

Danielle Daniel: No. I don't think so. I think on so many levels, I've changed. Of course I'm still kind of the same person, but I'm, I'm different as well and in a lot of ways our roles have reversed. You know, before Steve was this big, strong, 6'3, strapping soldier and he was the protector and he still is but in another way. I feel like I've had to step up and become a mother bear and protect my family and that has been a big transition for us.

Pj: Were you always that mother bear person? In other ways?

Danielle Daniel: I had it yes. I had it in me, I was that way with my younger brothers, I'm the older sibling. But in our relationship, not so much. But after Steve had his accident, I felt like I had to fight and fight and fight and now I choose my battles wisely because it is exhausting and you know, just yesterday, we were trying to find a hotel room that was accessible and they said it was but then Steve can't get into the washroom so... This is a, you know, a daily occurrence when we travel. So you can't fight all the time. Sometimes it's just being kind and gently educating or just having a conversation but that part of me has changed. Yes.

Pj: So is it safe to say this kind of an awareness has developed because of necessity?

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: Ok that's, that's fair. You talk in the book about the reality of shifting roles in your marriage, which is what we were just alluding to, in navigating, and I love this, a difficult menage-a-trois made up of a man, a woman, and the military.

Danielle Daniel: Right.

Pj: Can you explain what you mean?

Danielle Daniel: Yes. I think military couples will completely understand this. You're never quite just you and your partner, because the military is always there. When you serve your country, your country comes first and sometimes, a lot of times, that means putting yourself second. And its mission before family. It's course before couples as in...

Pj: Is that really a thing? Mission before family?

Danielle Daniel: Well...

Pj: Or is that just...

Danielle Daniel: I think it is. Yes. I think it is. It has to be because we wouldn't have a military. So I'm, in one sense, I completely understand why it has to be that way, but in another sense, we are human beings and we are trying to, you know, create strong families and like everybody else we want healthy relationships, but when you have this third entity in your marriage, it's very, very difficult to keep the couple strong and to not let that third entity rule you. And especially if you have a strong partner who also has goals and dreams and wants something for themselves, it could make it very challenging because when you're in the military, it's all about moving up the ranks and everything really does come second. Unless they make the choice to stay where they are and then... There's room for that, but Steve was always...

Pj: Ambitious.

Danielle Daniel: He was and that's what I liked about him.

Pj: Still is.

Danielle Daniel: Yes, yes he is, that's what we liked about each other but it does make for a more challenging relationship.

Pj: Well and you know what, to be honest, I am in awe, I mean truly, of what you have been doing and what you've had to do in your life. When you are trying to look after a brand new baby with an emergency caesarean section..

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: Twelve days later your husband is gone again. It's fascinating to me because clearly in reading the book, which I did, you are very different people. Surprisingly so.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: So how did you... Is it from... I imagine the military people have to sort of compartmentalize their lives, I'm imagining that military spouses do too. So what is that process like? In the book, you know, the, the handbook or guide book, is you taking excerpts from the Military Family Guidebook, is that what it's called?

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: ...On how to cope and what to expect. Was it helpful? Did you follow your own path? Tell me what that process is like.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah. I struggle with many things, when it comes to that, I think the military has tried to do their best and by providing these booklets and literature and guidelines of what to expect. But, like any family, like any large system, like a school board for example, nothing is perfect. There's always room for improvement and I think in this case, that includes the Canadian military. There's definitely room for improvement to provide strong supports emotionally for families and it was not very helpful for me and I think it's because not enough people are telling the truth about how hard it really is until they're completely broken. And sometimes you're so broken, you can't ask for help. And you know, for a long, long time I was broken but writing this book helped me put the pieces back together and it's also my hope that by sharing it, I'll also encourage others to speak up and share their stories because that's the only way that things can really improve, if we tell the truth. So we can make families as strong as possible because if families are stronger, then the military will be stronger because it's... We're all part of the same big engine.

Pj: What makes a strong family? What is your definition of a strong family?

Danielle Daniel: Well I think communication's number one, which again, is a challenging thing in the military, a lot of times we're not able to communicate as much as we'd like. And when Steve and I were, I say when we were in the military together because I feel like I've served as much as he has...

Pj: I think you have too by the way.

Danielle Daniel: *[Laughs]* Thank you. But in a different way of course, right. From the home front.

Pj: I find also fascinating when I'm talking about the differences in your personality. You're somebody who's artistic, you're somebody who's creative, you're somebody who reads taro cards. *[Danielle laughs]*

Danielle Daniel: Yeah, secret's out!

Pj: I know. It's not so secret it's in the book.

Danielle Daniel: *[Still laughing]* Right.

Pj: But I want to know, you know, you did a three-card reading.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah, oh.

Pj: The changer. Did that... Sometimes I'm a very superstitious person, might be the world of sport, Lots of superstitions. Did you have a superstitious reaction to the changer? Which means life altering event.

Danielle Daniel: Oh, I was completely terrified, which is why I left it out of the deck for months.

Pj: Oh did you? I didn't know that.

Danielle Daniel: Yes and I wouldn't do a reading with that card in the deck because it kept coming up. When Steve was back from Afghanistan I thought, well no he's back...

Pj: It's all good.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah, he's safe and sound. But this feeling inside of me wouldn't go away, wouldn't dissipate and I felt something was going to happen and he used to ride a really fast motorcycle. And I worried every time he got on that bike in the morning and then eventually when he drove it to Trenton to go on jump course. So yeah I guess you can say I was worried, very worried about that. It was just a feeling deep inside that I had and I also dreamt that he was in distress and it would wake me up in the middle of the night and he'd be snoring right beside me but I think something inside was preparing me for what was to come. Um... Yeah.

Pj: You know what's so interesting. I'm not sure you can actually really prepare for what's to come.

Danielle Daniel: Oh no.

Pj: And you know, it was fascinating to read about the fact that he was on that jump course in Trenton.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: You had a phone conversation about him doing five jumps and you recounted about how doing one jump was worth, by his description, an eight hour work day.

Danielle Daniel: Yes, eight jumps.

Pj: Eight jumps. Oh, I'm sorry. In any event, it was a huge number of jumps to be done in one day.

Danielle Daniel: Oh yes.

Pj: And then the other thing that really struck me was that extra phone call. Tell me about that.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah. The night before, um cause he's very, you know, he's not, he's quite serious and um...

Pj: Practical.

Danielle Daniel: Yes, he's a very practical person and you know his time was very limited then and we had said goodnight already on the phone and he had called back and wanted to just say goodnight one more time and to hear my voice one last time and I thought it was odd and I was pleasantly surprised.

Pj: Because you're usually the one who phones.

Danielle Daniel: Yes I'm... That's me. I'm the softie. And that we have gone through a very difficult year, so it was nice that eh was being very sweet and thoughtful and thought to do that but... Yes, you know, I think he was also sensing something as well and he also told me during the same conversation that he had taken the longest ride on his motorcycle that night and he just felt so alive and euphoric almost and he just couldn't get enough of it and then the next day everything changed. Everything.

Pj: Everything really did change.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: So tell me a little bit about, walk me through that day.

Danielle Daniel: It was the most beautiful blue sky. It was my last day teaching while... The students had finished, it was a P.D. day. So as my last day of school, I was to go and sort out my class and put away my report cards and Steve was coming home the next day for the Centennial Petawawa Celebration of some sort, there was airborne jumps, all kinds of wonderful things happening. It was a big party, it was Canada Day weekend. So it was very festive, a very festive feeling.

PJ: And this is what year?

Danielle Daniel: 2005 and that morning there were, there were no warnings for me about what was to come. And I went on with my day and then after lunch, shortly after lunch, I received just on the intercom, my maiden name was Madame Fraser, Madame Fraser, line one. I had...

Pj: This was at school?

Danielle Daniel: Yes and that's when I went by the school and I went to, to the secretary's office and she pointed to the phone, and she was also married to a soldier, and she said, "it's the military," and her face looked worried because we all know if you get a phone call, it's not good news. And then on the phone, it was a friend who had been there during the accident he was an officer now in... On course in Trenton as well and he told me that Steve had possibly broken both legs and hops. They weren't sure, but that I was to stand by and the doctor from the emergency would call me. He had been taken from Trenton to Belleville. And so I did. I waited for an hour and I just stayed by myself in this room. And then I felt really bad because I thought no matter what, he's not going to get on his motorcycle again, which he really loves. And then I got that second phone call from... The doctor, who pretty much straight up told me right away that your husband is paralyzed and he'll never walk again.

PJ: Oh, wow.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah, yeah. And in that split second, it's like... Well I think in the book I presented in the way that night turned into day and day turned into night and they would never be the same.

Pj: When you went for that first visit, what was in your head when you walked in?

Danielle Daniel: Right. Well even driving on my ride to Belleville, it was like, keep it together. Get your wall up night and strong, you have to be strong. He needs you. Yeah that was pretty much that. Just like, I was worried about him. I didn't know if he knew, I assumed that he knew. But I wasn't sure how much that he knew and if he was even awake and then I left my son, he was only two and I had to tell my babysitter: could you watching him, I don't know when I'll be back but my mom and Steve's mom is coming from Sudbury, which is four hours away. And I remember thinking he doesn't even have enough diapers.

Pj: Yeah.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah.

Pj: There's lots of stuff that goes on in that moment.

Danielle Daniel: Right.

Pj: And when I look at your face, it's like you're reliving it today again.

Danielle Daniel: Yeah that... I don't think I'll ever forget that...

Pj: That moment.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: And you know this is one of the reasons why I wanted to do this podcast, because I don't think that people really appreciate the full difficult of what it's like, even when everything's going well, you've got that dangerous thing in the back of your mind that your husband or your wife or your partner may not come home and then the added stress of an injury that just completely changes things.

Danielle Daniel: That's true.

Pj: Did you find, and I know that it was difficult at first, to be a support...

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: How did you guys get on the road to recovery and to rehabilitation?

Danielle Daniel: Pheuf. It took a while and surprisingly, you know, Steve and I did it at our own pace. This is why the book, that's part of the book as well, that we had to grieve in our own way.

Pj: For the loss of life you had.

Danielle Daniel: Yes and not necessarily together, which is difficult and, and people have been through really horrific things, you know, in a marriage know this, that sometimes that you don't always make it. But yes, it was hard in the beginning. He had to do it his own way, which was through soldiering on literally and, and through sports he found a way and for him... He had to move forward. He couldn't sit and even think about what was really happening or it would have killed him, he needed to move forward. He wouldn't...

Pj: To process it.

Danielle Daniel: Yes. He wouldn't look back, you know. Worse for me, I need to... I needed to sit inside every single loss, turn it inside out and say goodbye for me to truly be able to move on and that's what I had to do. And that's really hard when you have one partner who was like, you know, I need to move on. This is how I need to survive, I need to move forward and all you want to do is sit in that place and I can understand it now looking back. At the time I felt, how dare you. You're selfish, you only see your pain, but I'm hurting too, I've lost too. So it took us a very long while, you know, to find a way back together and, and we needed to fall apart really. Our marriage did fall apart before we found our way back to each other.

Pj: You know, I read in the book about your own struggles with depression. Did that give you... Sometimes there's a gift in depression and that is the gift of becoming self-aware and really working on oneself. Did you find that there was some kind of... Not... A gift is maybe too strong a word, but some kind of a perspective that you were able to gain on maybe what he was trying to do with his processing?

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: Through your coping with depression?

Danielle Daniel: Yes definitely. I think for me it was because, not only did I lose our life, you know, future children that we were planning on having, just a life that dreamt of for our, for our, for ourselves, but I also lost my profession. My identity, because I, I stopped teaching in order to take care of my family and I was always a very independent person and so Steve was building his life. He was going back to school, he was meeting these people through sport, he was surrounding himself with newness. And I was stuck at home changing sheets. And I was miserable. And in a way, maybe I should've clued into that a little sooner, but with depression, you don't always see clearly.

Pj: No, that's for sure.

Danielle Daniel: Right. So when I did finally break down, I did realize that I need to do something that would feed me again. And the way that Steve was and it wasn't necessarily teaching in a classroom anymore because I guess I was very much passionate about writing and about art. But writing is what, you know, brought me out of this depression eventually. So yes, in a way it was a gift that... I did learn a lot about myself and it has made me a stronger person.

Pj: I'm curious about art. Art from before Steve's accident, from when you were younger, is it different? Is it reflected different in the art that you have today?

Danielle Daniel: Well I think I've always been a creative person. I've always made things for people that I love. You know, I used to write notes and just paint things and make things. I've always been a maker.

Pj: I love that.

Danielle Daniel: Thank you. Yeah, it's really part of who I am. And as a teacher I think I didn't have enough space for that, which was why I was completely satisfied in teaching, because, you know, you have to teach the grade six test and you don't have as much space to be creative. But after Steve's accident it became a way to survive. Like especially with the writing. I needed to put these words down on the page because they would wake me up in the middle of the night. I remember just going to Steve's appointments in Toronto, I would go to the bathroom in the hotel room and start scribbling on a note pad because the stories were just pouring out. And I just... There was no way to not write them.

Pj: Yeah you were compelled to.

Danielle Daniel: I was.

Pj: You know, it's interesting. Sometimes when a person breaks down either emotionally, mentally, or physically, it allows them a certain freedom to come back and be... An enhanced person. Not a different person, just enhanced because those barriers, real or imagined are broken somehow.

Danielle Daniel: That's true.

Pj: So first there was the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: And more recently the Invictus Games Orlando 2016 in May. So I want to know because I want to kind of focus on the Invictus Games in Orlando, but I want to know about that experience, because it was a family experience.

Danielle Daniel: Yes. The Invictus Games was really a celebration for us and... You know, it's something that I feel we need more of, to involve the whole family. And what I loved about the Invictus Games and what I love about Prince Harry and what he's done is that he's included... Not just the soldier and how the soldier serves, but how the whole family serves their country. And for... I can't tell you how much that's meant to me in my own healing. For it to be validated and for it to be understood and appreciated because I feel like we still have some work to do in that area. You know and I think it's all about talking about it. We just have to talk about it more and so yes, Invictus Games was absolutely empowering and a celebration.

Pj: Tell me about a family highlight or maybe even two. Oh and Owen came with you.

Danielle Daniel: Oh yes. Owen was with us which was so special. Yeah, well, just sitting on the field with all of the, the athletes was incredible and just that sense there was this energy in the air. You know it's very hard to describe but it was like, it felt like magic. And then, and then of course we got four day passes to anything at Disney and Owen wanted to go and swim with the sharks, which he did and I was terrified and... *[Laughs]*

Pj: *[Laughs]* You're a good mom to be terrified.

Danielle Daniel: Right? And then, you know, the Star Wars Troopers were out and that was so fun. And of course what I love about Disney World is it's so accessible. It's, it's so easy for a family to get around and that was wonderful and just to be around other athletes and families who get it. Who get what it's like to have to live in a world where it's not complete accessible. Who, you know, they get it. They don't stare at you like you're a circus family, you know. And we get that a lot sometimes.

Pj: Well it's interesting, when we're talking about accessibility, some people think that a wider door is what accessible means.

Danielle Daniel: Right.

Pj: That isn't it at all.

Danielle Daniel: No.

Pj: It's actually being able to examine things... Physical barriers and being able to sort of deal with them and understand that not everybody can overcome, like overcome them truly.

Danielle Daniel: That's right.

Pj: Modifications.

Danielle Daniel: Yes it's about having an independent life and not relying on others. Like Steve drives his vehicle and often people will say, "Oh how did you get here," and Steve says, "Well I drove here." You know and it's still not known and even when he's in the hospital a lot of times they'll think he's the patient, even though he's got a stethoscope around his neck and yes and he's the doctor. But I think this is the best way that you can teach and raise awareness, by living that life of true independence and service that you are still such an incredible

member of society and that you still have so much to offer because a lot of the times we think it, it's over.

Pj: Yeah, and it certainly isn't over.

Danielle Daniel: It isn't over.

Pj: So tell me three lessons that you think that your life together with your husband Steve, three life lessons you've offered your son Owen.

Danielle Daniel: Hmm... I think that you can turn a challenge... Into opportunities. Depending on, you know, how you look at things. That I'm hoping that he's become a more compassionate and empathetic soul. I know that he has because my, you know, his teachers tell me and that he's, he's a very special boy that way. He has a lot of emotional intelligence which is really important for me and Steve to be a king and human person. Yeah and I think he is not afraid of people with disabilities. He is... He sees the world the way that I wish we could all see it, you know, and even for myself and for Steve, when Steve first had his accident we had never really know anybody in a wheelchair. It took some learning on our part as well, but Owen, he's grown up with this. And I remember, I have a memory of Owen when Steve went to med school for about eight months he had to go to North Bay to do his third year and Owen... Steve told Owen that, "Own, dad's leaving now, you have to help take care of the house. Help, help mom out to be the man of the house." And so shortly after he left on the Sunday, Owen started using a second wheelchair.

Pj: Oh really.

Danielle Daniel: He was wheeling around the house, he was coming to dinner in the wheelchair, brushing his teeth in the wheelchair, going to bed, transferring from the wheelchair to his bed, to the point where he would park it at the door and when he got back home from school, he'd get into the chair.

Pj: And how old was he at this time?

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Danielle Daniel: He was... I think he was about... Oh my goodness, I don't know, seven? No, he's older than that. Third year... Like three, three/four years ago. Yeah.

Pj: Still under ten.

Danielle Daniel: Yes. And um... I got annoyed. I'm like, Owen, you know, let's go. You need to hurry up and get ready for school and this is taking too long. He's like but mom, dad told me to be the man of the house.

Pj: Oh my goodness.

Danielle Daniel: And for him, that mean to be like dad and he didn't see the chair, you know, as a disability, but rather as an enhancement, as a...

Pj: Part of life.

Danielle Daniel: ...A part of his father. Yes. It was an extension of his father, not something less than and he teaches me. He has taught me to be more compassionate. He definitely has so you know, our son has learned from us, maybe, yes, but we have learned from his, him as well.

Pj: You know, it's so interesting because in your book you talk about when Steve came home from the tour after Owen was born.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: And he's pushing that little baby and saying, "You look like you looked after mom."

Danielle Daniel: Right.

Pj: And it was just very sweet. So that same message has carried on.

Danielle Daniel: Yes.

Pj: Do you think that there is a message in if somebody is listening and they're the spouse of an injured soldier, is there a message that can be offered through support and through participation in Invictus Games?

Danielle Daniel: You mean a message for the spouse or a message for the soldier who is...

Pj: Either. Or their family. Is there something to be gained from anybody doing sport?

Danielle Daniel: Yes, I absolutely encourage it. I guess, you know, a lot of the times when, especially for us when we left the military, we lost our community. And it's very difficult to transition into the civilian world and even though people are kind and loving and want to be supportive, it's not the same. But joining a team like Invictus Games, you're joining a community again and people who know exactly what you've been through and there could be some real healing, you know, to happen there, even myself with others' wives, spouses out there at the Invictus Games.

Pj: In Orlando?

Danielle Daniel: Yes like just a short amount of time that we got to spend together, even going from like one even to another on the bus, just having that time to share, it really makes you feel less alone. And you feel like you're not just an island in your, you know, in your pain or in your loss.

Pj: And is there still pain for you?

Danielle Daniel: No, not really. I think I've completely moved through it, specially now that this book is out. I think, ever since I learned it was going to be published, there's been a shift, which is wonderful. Do I still feel some loss once in a while? I'll get a little tense here and there, there's a trigger, like, you know, healing is not linear. But for the most part the best is yet to come. A hundred percent. Yes.

Pj: And do you think if Steve's accident hadn't happened, is there a way that you can characterize or describe what you think your life would have been in 2016. Do you have any idea?

Danielle Daniel: I do. I don't think we'd be together.

Pj: Ok.

Danielle Daniel: No I don't think we would have made it, because I know the kind of soldier that he was, the things that he wanted to achieve, and he would of, he would have kept choosing the military. And I would have chosen myself.

Pj: Do you know what, your book, *The Dependant*, is an extraordinary portrait of a family. I hope that everybody listening will read it, now how can they order it?

Danielle Daniel: They can order it through Amazon or through Chapters Indigo. It's also available through my publisher online or through my website there's a link.

Pj: Which is danielledaniel.com. Do you know what, you have taught me a huge amount just in a very short conversation, Danielle Daniel. And thanks for talking to me.

Danielle Daniel: Thank you so much for having me.

Pj: This has been a treat.

[Music Playing]

Pj: Thanks for listening to Invictus Games Radio. For more information, visit:
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357 Bay Street, Suite 300, Toronto, ON M5H 2T7
www.invictusgames2017.com

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