

# 'I Was Four Feet Away When I Heard the Bullets'

Salena Zito : 5-6 minutes : 7/13/2024

BUTLER, PENN. — As soon as he saw me, he shook my hand.

It was that thing that all electeds do—the familiarity, the warmth, or the faux-warmth—but he's better. It feels like he means it.

“Salena, it's so great to see you. How are you doing? How are all those grandkids?”

Donald Trump always remembers my grandkids. I have four. Last time I talked to him, over the phone in the spring, I told him about my latest, Rocco. He replied, “I love my grandkids, too. I love being around them.”

It was just before six o'clock on Saturday when he greeted me. He was about to go onstage for a rally about 50 miles from my hometown of Pittsburgh. Inside the tent with me were forty local cops—men and women.

Many of them told him they were looking forward to him being president.

“Thank you so much for your service,” he said.

He was in great spirits. At rallies like these, he always is.

These are the people I wrote about during his first campaign in 2016, when I noticed that Trump, the billionaire, was connecting with blue-collar crowds. They weren't taking him literally, as I [wrote at the time](#). They were taking him seriously.

Eight years ago, he won [65 percent](#) of this county. He won it again, by the same percentage, in 2020. Despite January 6, despite his felony conviction, the support of the people in this corner of Pennsylvania has not wavered.

The crowd formed in the sprawling field five hours before he arrived. Even in the 90-degree heat, they waited for him. Kids. Old people in wheelchairs. They waved signs: “Trump 2024.” “Joe Biden You're Fired.” They listened to music. They heard speeches. A Ukrainian priest gave an invocation. As they waited, the crowd swelled to 30,000 people.

Then Lee Greenwood blared through the speakers: “God Bless the USA.”

Right around 6 p.m., Trump appeared on a red walkway, in his trademark blue suit and MAGA hat, waving to his fans. The excitement grew to a frenzy as he strode to the podium.

I was four feet from the stage, in a causeway with about five other journalists. My daughter, a photographer, was next to me. Her husband was next to her.

Trump started speaking.

Six minutes later, we heard the noise.

*Pop.*

*Pop.*

*Pop.*

Some people in the crowd might have thought they heard fireworks. But I knew exactly what it was. I own a gun.

I looked up at the president. He touched his ear. I was shocked to see blood on his face. A smear of red across his cheek.

Suddenly, he was surrounded. Everyone went down.

My daughter hit the ground. My son-in-law lay on top of her. I threw my body next to theirs. Immediately, a security officer was on top of me.

"ARE YOU OKAY? ARE YOU OKAY?" he asked.

Three more shots.

*Pop.*

*Pop.*

*Pop.*

I've since seen videos of what happened. People were screaming. But all I remember hearing was an eerie silence. With that kind of crowd, you'd expect pandemonium, a stampede. But I never had a sense of chaos.



"I've since seen videos of what happened. People were screaming. But all I remember hearing was an eerie silence," writes Selena Zito pictured here at the rally. (via [X](#))

Trump was back on his feet within seconds, although his red hat was knocked off his head. He was calm.

I heard him shout to one of his staffers, "Get my shoes!"

He lifted his arm in the air. I think he shouted, "Fight!"

Then he definitely shouted, "USA!"

The crowd chanted it back in unison.

The former president was moved off the stage. We were told he was flown to a local hospital. I was moved into a holding pen with the other journalists.



I'm still in shock. I can't make sense of any of it right now. As a journalist, you're always looking 360 degrees around you at all times—but for details, not for danger.

The whole thing was deeply disorienting. We've all seen enactments of this sort of violence—in movies or documentaries—but when you experience it, it doesn't happen that way. There's no soundtrack, no visual signposts. It's just unreal.

What's clear to me after today is that if someone is determined to commit an act of political violence, they will find a way.

Earlier that afternoon, before the shooting that left two people dead including the gunman, I asked an 11-year-old: "Is this your first Trump rally?"

"Yeah," he smiled, "but it's not going to be my last."



***Salena Zito is a Pittsburgh-based politics reporter for the [Washington Examiner](#). Follow her on X at [@ZitoSalena](#), and click below to listen to her talk what happened at Trump's Saturday rally—and what it means for America:***

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