A Public Health Crisis

In those 2 hours of hiding, Carly became an activist and an advocate for gun control. She and her peers at Stoneman Douglas are leading the way. The media has taken note of this articulate, activist group of teens. Instead of getting ready for prom and graduation, they planned and participated in a march in Washington, DC, on March 24, 2018 in a #MarchForOurLives event. They have appeared on CNN, MSNBC, and countless other media outlets. Some have met with the President, rallied at their state capitol in Tallahassee, participated in a 2-hour town hall meeting on CNN, wrote a song in memory of their 17 fallen peers and teachers, attended funerals and vigils, written blog posts, created Tweets that have gone viral, and published reports in their school newspaper.

I am a school nurse, a relentless one, trained in Stop the Bleed, Mental Health First Aid, CPR, and crisis counseling, but that day I felt helpless, outraged, and exhausted from the cycle of violence.

Nothing has changed between September 6, 1949 and February 14, 2018. The profile of the killers looks strikingly similar; their weapon of choice, and access to assault style ammunition, is remarkably easy. Thoughts and prayers aside, they have their place, but this is a public health crisis and we need to take action.

My dad passed away in 2009 and for most of his life he kept his pain and trauma hidden. He was 12 years old when my grandmother hid him in a closet as his entire family – mother, father, and grandmother – were murdered, along with 10 other people, by a deranged neighbor with a semi-automatic weapon. He survived what was then deemed to be the first mass murder in history – where 13 people were killed in a shooting spree in Camden, NJ – by hiding in a closet. That boy was my father, and while he physically survived the killings, his mind and spirit were haunted all of his remaining days. Ironically, my father was buried on September 6, 2009, the 60th anniversary of the murders.

Fast forward to February 14, 2018. This time it is my niece who survives a mass murder, by another killer with a similar semi-automatic gun, by hiding in a closet. She, along with her 17 classmates and brave teacher, huddled in a closet inside their classroom until they were freed by the authorities. Seventeen students and staff were killed, 15 were injured, and a community was terrorized and forever traumatized.

My sister, Merri, called me as she raced to my niece’s school to tell me that there was an “active shooter” at Carly’s school. We knew Carly was alive because she was texting my sister from inside the closet of her journalism class. I was texting with my sister in real time as I watched the perpetrator arrested on live television. I was giving my sister updates as she stood vigil waiting outside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. Standing next to my sister was another mother who had not been able to reach her daughter. Meadow Pollack was not texting back her mother back, the phone rang unanswered, her mother was frantic. Meadow had been fatally wounded, something her mom would not find out until late into the night.

Protest, Activism, and Advocacy

Our healthcare system, with limited resources to address the mental health challenges that impact our students, is broken. Our educational system does not have a safety net to catch those students who are most challenging, most impacted, and most at risk at causing harm to themselves and others. Politicians,
both bullied and wooed by the golden handcuffs of lobbying groups like the National Rifle Association, often turn a blind eye to the real issues and offer old, tired, and ridiculous arguments that really have nothing to do with guns and everything to do with dollars.

My nursing activism drives my work as a school nurse in Camden, NJ, where poverty, community violence, toxic stress, trauma, and health inequity frames my students’ and families’ lived experience. My activism is amplified on a personal level since the recent events at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School where my niece is a student. I write a weekly blog called “The Relentless School Nurse” and my recent columns have been focused on the aftermath of yet another school shooting in our country. For my family though, this is now a generational trauma.

As nurses, we can raise our voices in protest, activism, and advocacy. We bring compassion to our everyday contacts with those we serve. We are good people. Caring people. And intelligent people. Why let the opportunity of the most recent, and senseless, mass school shooting go unaddressed, causing it to become another statistic, a footnote? To quote an often-used phrase, if not now, when?

#SchoolNursesDemandAction

I promised my sister and niece that I would do whatever I can on the public health policy side of the equation. I am reaching out to my nursing colleagues for help, support, and yes, your thoughts and prayers. #SchoolNursesDemandAction is a grassroots effort to bring attention to the public health emergency/epidemic of gun violence in our country. My father’s family was murdered by a man who used a semi-automatic weapon. My niece’s friends, peers, and teachers were murdered by a man who used a semi-automatic weapon. None of the survivors will ever be the same. Enough is enough! Let us all learn from this horrific story, from my family’s generational trauma, and honor the memory of those who have died by taking a meaningful stand. $