

A Personal Story about Hearing the News from Parkland by Grace Rousell

On this past Valentine's Day, I came home from school and checked my twitter. At the top of the page there was a live news feed that said another school shooting had happened in Florida. I clicked on the story and watched for a few minutes to see what was going on. It was around 3:00, so no one knew the amount of people that were killed or how serious the damage was. I left the live news feed up on my phone and let it play while I packed. I was getting ready to leave for Florida the following morning to visit my grandma over break. At first, all I thought was, "oh, another school shooting," but as I continued to watch the news throughout the night, I realized that this time was different. Around the same time that America found out how many had died, it was watching videos that were taken as the shooting was happening. Students were posting their reactions to the death of their classmates, and they were receiving advice from students that had survived past shootings. One video I watched showed a SWAT team coming into a classroom and carrying out a girl who looked to be fatally injured. She wasn't moving. There was blood on the floor, and the painful reactions of her classmates could be heard in the background. That's why this time was different. Technology allowed the world to see through the eyes of the victims, and I could easily see myself and my classmates going through the same situation. The classrooms in the videos looked so much like every other classroom I've been in, and I could substitute in my friends for the kids that were watching the scene unfold. I didn't stop thinking about those lives that were lost, and I started to notice in the weeks after that other students didn't either. I'm so proud of the Parkland survivors and students across the country for reacting to this tragedy in a powerful and persistent way that is going beyond thoughts and prayers.

Sermon (Arianna)

In the United States, youth tend to be the least politically involved demographic. They vote less and don't run for office or contribute money to campaign funds. This can be attributed to a lack of education, or the feeling that because we're young we can't influence anything in politics. But lately youth have been getting involved in a key political issue that has been rocking both sides of the political spectrum boat, which, if you haven't gathered yet, is the topic of gun control and school shootings. Since you guys are (mostly) all adults, you probably already understand most of the arguments for and against gun control, so we're not going to talk about gun control. We're going to discuss what it's like for youth to live in the climate of fear that has encompassed US schools, and how that fear has motivated students around the country to speak out. Now, for those of you who have long since left high school, this issue does not just affect schools like the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, Sandy Hook Elementary School in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and Marshall County High School in Benton, Kentucky. This topic hits close to home for us, because it's actually close to home. On January 29th, Lisbon had a

shooting threat, complete with a hit list of specific students to kill, which set off a wave of threats at the Canton High School and Ogdensburg Academy the next day. And three weeks ago Gouverneur had a bomb threat which led to a school wide evacuation. And considering that there currently are no federal gun laws that keep every state to the same standards, I think it would be safe to say that this issue is relevant for every student in the United States.

The federal government has no legislation requiring schools to conduct lockdown drills, but within the last ten years the number of drills New York schools are required to conduct has gone up. Now, if any of you remember 'duck and cover drills' that came out of the Cold War bomb threats, lockdown drills are the equivalent for our generation. Except that the possibility of a school shooting is much higher than that of a bomb. And with lockdown drills one's silence, location, and hiding place could be the difference between life and death, whereas with duck and cover drills no one has control over the situation. Lockdown drills are much more personal and impactful because of this. In fact, when we were writing the sermon we realized that it's a widespread thing among kids to daydream about what we would do should the drill be an actuality, sometimes even during class. Usually teachers know about the drills beforehand, so if a teacher does their grading during the drill you know it's not serious, but sometimes I analyze the logistics of what would happen. Like which kids are the closest to the door, how likely a shooter would hear the kid next to me humming, and what barriers or windows are nearby. Now that it's the digital age we can see the videos of recent shootings, and it's not hard to transfer that same scenario to our own schools, making our daydreams all the more real. I've also heard about elementary students being scared of going to school, for fear of being shot.

(Claire)

A couple weeks ago, my sisters and I went to Ogdensburg elementary school to do a project with a 4th grade class. The first thing the teacher had the kids do was go over their safety plan. We talked about what we would need to do if a shooter got inside the building. The kids knew exactly what to do, as if they had gone over it a hundred times. One of the students, a nine year old boy, stated, "We need to listen to our teacher and follow her instructions no matter what, even if it means going out the safety window when its 20 degrees and we're in t-shirts." And then, "After we go to our hiding spot in the corner, we take deep breaths to stay calm, and go to our happy place.." We were with the kids for a completely unrelated topic to school shootings, but they were completely un-phased over talking about their lockdown plan.

(Grace)

This issue has crowded the back of the minds of students all over the country, but it seems that we have still become desensitized. Meaning that even though students are concerned about their safety they move on after shootings occur, because it has become a

pattern of reaction. I wasn't alive for Columbine, but from what I know the outrage and shock were powerful. It caused tension between students, and it was a frightening time for the nation. But we don't have that same reaction to shootings anymore. We see them on the news, express some statement of outrage, and move along with our day. Parents express momentary grief, and students shove the images in the news clips in the back of their mind to ponder after their homework or during English class. These shootings are outrageous and horrifying, which we as a nation recognize, but it has become a part of the normal to move on. This, in itself, is something I find to be outrageous. The 270 shootings since Columbine have raised our tolerance for violence in schools like we've tolerated the genocides in Myanmar and Yemen, and the refugee crisis in Syria. In fact, we have created a cycle called the Columbine Effect that occurs when a shooting happens: there is outrage, gun laws are debated and the last mass shooting is brought up, we say thoughts and prayers, NRA members confirm guns are good, the conflict simmers down for a while, nobody cares except for the occasional time it is mentioned in the news, and then we have another mass shooting to repeat the cycle. We have even become complacent in the preventative measures we take to reduce shooting fatalities. Lockdown drills have become a part of the normal routine for students, and we have resigned ourselves to having to do them several times a year. The drills have acquired some sort of mundaneness to them, despite the uncertainty they hold. We practice lockdown drills almost as much as we practice evacuating in case of a fire.

(Maddie)

So, the questions I have are, why do I have to sacrifice my emotional energy and time worrying about being shot in my school? Why should we need to have so many lockdown drills? When will someone do something about this? But lucky for us all, there are people trying to answer these questions. After Parkland, the Columbine Effect was broken. The survivors of Parkland are speaking out against the apathy and ineffective measures adults have been using to discuss and implement gun control laws. And unlike previous attempts from adults, they're actually making progress. The Parkland students have gone on national TV to have discussions with pro-gun politicians and activists, they have raised 3.7 million dollars for future events, and Emma Gonzalez is one of the students spearheading the March For Our Lives on March 24th, in Washington D.C., with sister marches on all 7 continents, including one in Potsdam. They have also encouraged student walkouts in support for gun control measures throughout the nation and have been using the media to call attention to shootings and to spread information and outrage. As Emma Gonzalez has said, "If us students have learned anything, it's that if you don't study you will fail. And in this case, if you actively do nothing, people continually end up dead. So it's time to start doing something." I think this quote really resonates with a lot of students, because many of us have experienced the consequences of doing nothing to prepare for an exam.

(Lexi)

So now the Parkland students have turned the tide. With last Wednesday's (Thursday for Canton) Walkout, the nation has gotten a taste at just how many students are on board with the #NeverAgain movement, and ultimately gun control. According to the Women's March Youth Empower, that has helped coordinate student walkouts, from the 3,000 registered demonstrations about a million students participated in a walkout. Not counting the unregistered demonstrations, or the kids who didn't put their name on the list of participants. Over a million kids want something done. Of course, that's only one million out of fifteen million high school students in America, but I once read that it only takes 4% of a population to start a movement. So I'd say it's a good start to have over 4% of all students on board.

As for what we are doing? The Parkland students have been encouraging students to contact their representatives via phone call, letter, email, etc. to tell Congress what we want and when. This is something that I believe the Canton high school wants to start, because as of right now we do not think Elise Stefanik's position on gun control legislation in terms of preventing school shootings is... favorable. And something I personally want to champion is voting. Voter registration and turnout among youth is dismal, but imperative if we want to see change. The midterm elections are on their way, and if the voter turnout among every demographic follows the usual pattern then things may go downhill for the youth movement. The situation feels tense, and it should, but that doesn't dampen our enthusiasm. I, and the Parkland leaders, understand that Congress hasn't passed gun control legislation since 1994, and that right now the numbers in Congress aren't favorable to pass any right now. But just the idea of the chance of being able to change something, change someone's mind, or even just spark more effective discussion makes me and my peers hopeful. That was one of my favorite outcomes of the Canton walkout. Kids began talking about it. Not arguing or fighting, but actual discussions. Much unlike the political discourse on facebook that I have been seeing among the adults. Personally, I'd like to see this method of discussion transferred to you adults, and see a change in legislation as a result.

And while we are on the topic, as an organizer of a walkout, I'd like to take some time to discuss something adults have decided to weigh in on. That thing being bullying. For those who have not seen the #WalkUpNotOut on facebook, it is the idea that student activists should be doing more to address bullying within their schools, instead of doing a walkout to advocate for gun control. And while I agree that we as students should be addressing and fixing bullying, I also would like to note that the problem school shootings is incredibly complex. Bullying and gun control two separate, but both important, aspects of the problem. And we could probably do a whole other church service around fixing bullying in North Country schools, however with the student walkouts we have chosen to address gun control. This choice does not mean that we are ignoring bullying, but acknowledging another part of the problem. But I digress.

In summary, the national walkout day went very well, and has left many students hopeful and excited. But as students, we have limited political power, so ultimately it's up to adults to finish the job. But what does that even mean? As a youth group, we have decided that it means being active in both our schools and the political process. Which essentially means "Please, I beg of you, vote!!! If not for yourself then for me!" Only one kid in the youth group will be eligible to vote in the NY 21st district midterm election. So for those of you who don't vote, for whatever reason, please do it anyway!! The only way our nation's political parties will gain goodness and respectability is if good and respectable people join it and make it that way. And since those of us who are under 18 can't vote, we clearly need some help with this. You can also help support our schools by getting a teaching certificate to be a substitute teacher, donating money to the art and drama programs, or even just going to school sports games, theater productions, and concerts. We value the support from our community, and it becomes so much more meaningful to see bleachers and auditoriums filled with people you know aren't actually obligated to go. Pay attention to what the youth in our area are doing, and show up when you can. There are so many other ways to help schools and their students, and we implore you to listen to us and our movement and to do something about it.