

Student, pastor reflect on 1998 Jonesboro shooting

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



For about six months before Lacey Vance sent her daughter, Scarlet, to kindergarten last year, her nervousness was more than typical first-time parent jitters.

"I could tell that it was very out of character for me to be kept up at night about this," she said.

But the fear was understandable. In 1998, Lacey (then-Hawkins) was an outgoing 12-year-old who loved showing horses, had just joined cheerleading and was active in her school's gifted and talented program.

She felt safe as a seventh grader at the small Westside Middle School, which had about 100 students and teachers outside of Jonesboro.

March 24 marked the 26th anniversary of the shooting at Westside Middle School in Craighead County, where students Andrew Golden, 11, and Mitchell Johnson, 13, triggered a fire alarm and shot from the woods behind the school at students and teachers as they evacuated. According to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, the shooters fired 30 rounds at the group, killing four female students and a teacher and injuring 10 others. It was one of the first school shootings and remains the deadliest mass shooting at a middle school in the United States.

Since 1998, there have been more than 400 school shootings in the United States, according to *The Washington Post*.

Vance, now 39, who attends Mass at St. Joseph Church in Conway, was there the day of the shooting, and Msgr. Jack Harris was pastor at Blessed Sacrament Church in Jonesboro, ministering to the school and community five years after the attack. Both reflected on that day and where society is now when it comes to gun violence.

"We've hardened ourselves, that's for sure. We've become such a violent society. We just sort of live with it. We looked at ourselves in Jonesboro as being a one-off, as something horrible and it will never happen again. And instead, it just unfolded a year later, practically to the day Columbine (High School shooting in Colorado) happened. That put us into a shock up there. But then it has just continued," Msgr. Harris said.

'That stays with you'

There are moments from that day Vance cannot forget. She was sitting in math class when the fire alarm went off.

"Everybody was excited because it was pretty nice outside that day. And, you know, a fire drill back then was like, 'This is cool. Let's go outside, miss 15 minutes of class.' So we all get up and file out of the building," she said.

The students heard popping noises and were shuffled into the gym. While rumors of a robbery or a hostage situation swirled around the gym, Vance said it was clear some students were missing. She immediately began worrying about her mother, a computer lab instructor at the school.

"A teacher, who was one of my mom's good friends, walked in and all I remember is seeing blood all over her shoes and thinking, 'What is going on?' And then I really started panicking," Vance said, adding her mother was safe. "... Then you start hearing people scream in the gym.

I think a lot of that was the friends being missing, but I know of at least one kid, maybe more than one, who had been shot and didn't realize it and were in the gym with us."

Vance stayed at the school that day longer than most because her mother worked there, watching ambulances and police, seeing the blood in the hallway, trash bins overturned from students who hid and the bullet holes that dotted the walls behind the bleachers in the gym, which was in the line of fire.

"That stays with you," she said.

'But I can't get over it'

Msgr. Harris got the call about the shooting that afternoon. He was soon in that same gym where community leaders met with shocked citizens, stayed to answer calls that evening and met with staff the following day, along with counselors.

"I was put in with the group that was the cafeteria workers. Those ladies were surrogate mothers to these kids," Msgr. Harris said. "... Because this happened at about 12:35 p.m., in the afternoon, immediately after lunch, these ladies felt like, 'We can't believe what we did to these kids. We fed them lunch and sent them out to be shot.' That's not at all what happened, but that's how they felt."

The students returned two days after the shooting. Though counseling was available, Vance did not remember processing what happened.

"I think they thought normalcy is the best thing, and I understand that, given the resources available at the time. ... I think all of us just sort of put a lid on that and kept on going because we didn't know otherwise," Vance said.

For the next five years, Msgr. Harris was a steady presence, attending sports and school activities. He was a listening ear for students with their parents and assisted with camps organized for student survivors in the years following the shooting. He said he watched as students grieved, gravitating toward him and sometimes acting out when he was around because he was the silent reminder of the trauma.

"What they're saying is, 'I'm not permitted to talk about this. People tell me, get over it, move on. But I can't get over it,'" Msgr. Harris said.

Vance graduated from Westside High School in 2003 but has never returned to the middle school. Msgr. Harris became a crisis counselor, working with the National Organization for Victim Advocacy to minister everywhere from Columbine, Colo., to New York City after 9/11. In addition to his work as a pastor in Center Ridge and Saint Vincent, he ministers to death row inmates.

Peace at a new school

While Vance has spent most of her life blocking out the realities of that day, including becoming news-avoidant, sending her only child to school made the trauma boil over.

"You have real pictures to put with the fear in your head where you can picture your own kid in the same situation you were in, and that's very scary," Vance said.

Close friends and clients recommended St. Joseph Elementary School in Conway, and on their first visit, Vance said they greeted Scarlet by name, which was an immediate comfort. Scarlet, turning 7 in October, is now in her second year at St. Joseph in first grade.

Vance is a second-year room mom and said the family is excited about the connection the school has given them to the parish. She praised the teacher's "hawkeye" nature, the school's proximity to the police station and its overall commitment to security.

"In the event of an emergency, not only do you want to be able to get there quickly, but I want to be able to walk up to anybody here and say, 'Where's my kid' and them know who I am and know who my child is immediately. And here that happens," Vance said. "... This school is the best thing ever."



A memorial garden at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, seen here Sept. 22, honors those who died and were injured when two students opened fire. (Aprille Hanson Spivey)

Common Gun Objections

The Michigan Catholic Conference publication "Focus" shared different topics on guns and gun violence from a Catholic perspective. In their article, "Responding to Gun Safety Reform Objections," they shared tips on Catholic responses to common gun objections. Here are three:

- "Objection: Guns don't kill people, people kill people."

"Response: People live in a fallen world where conflict is sometimes inevitable. The question is whether that conflict will become deadly. The availability of a gun to people involved in violent or angry conflict reasonably leads to an increased risk of serious injury or death."

- “Objection: These measures violate the Second Amendment and my freedom as an American to own a gun.”

“Response: Catholic social principles hold that with rights come responsibilities, and that applies to the Second Amendment. As the American bishops have taught, ‘the unlimited freedom to possess and use handguns must give way to the rights of all people to safety and protection against those who misuse these weapons.’ Catholics do not advocate for freedom from obligation or restriction, but rather freedom for human flourishing. The common good of society includes respect for life and for peace. A peaceful society is not possible if violent death by gunfire is increasingly prevalent.”

- “Objection: You cannot legislate away evil. Homicides will continue despite these laws.”

“Response: Catholics believe civil law expresses the moral order and promotes the common good in society. Although it is true that civil law alone cannot prevent all bad acts, there is extensive research that certain gun safety policies are very likely to save lives, thereby promoting the value of human life and peace to society.”

Read more at micatholic.org/advocacy/news-room/focus/2023/a-catholic-response-to-gun-violence/responding-to-gun-safety-reform-objections/