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I collected school shooting stories for years. What haunted me most was the waiting

Gun violence awareness isn't just about statistics and slogans

By **LOREN KLEINMAN**

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Gun-control advocates hold a vigil outside of the National Rifle Association (NRA) headquarters following the recent mass shooting at Robb Elementary School on May 25, 2022 in Fairfax, Virginia. (Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images)



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I’ve sat with dozens of survivors and grieving parents over the years, collecting their stories with my co-editor, Amye Archer, for “If I Don’t Make It, I Love You: Survivors in the Aftermath of School Shootings,” an anthology of voices from school shooting survivors and families left behind.

We didn’t collect these stories just to preserve them. I’m writing this now because the waiting hasn’t ended — and neither has the violence. And across the chaos, the grief, the impossible trauma, that one word surfaced again and again. Waiting to know if their child was alive. Waiting for a name to appear.

Waiting to identify a body. Waiting in an ER hallway while doctors tried to piece together the person they once tucked in at night.

I think about that word often now — especially as a parent. Because in the quiet of an ordinary day, I get to wait for my child: in the school pickup line; while she ties her shoes; through a tantrum, a story, a song. And I realize what kind of waiting I'm lucky enough to do — the kind where I already know my child is alive.

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Mitchell and Annika Dworet waited for hours after the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in **Parkland, Fla.** Their son Alex was shot and survived. Their older son Nick was killed. “The trauma started that day,” he said, “waiting in the parking lot at 2:20 p.m., and finding out what happened to Nick at 3 a.m. the next morning in a hotel from the FBI.”

Now, he said, “I’m in a situation that no parent would, could ever imagine... one killed, and one wounded by this shooting. I just miss him walking through the house with his swim gear and his backpack and his gigantic water bottle.”

Alex, Mitchell said, “deals with three issues from that event. Being injured, seeing classmates murdered, and losing his brother. We just can’t imagine. This is why he is my hero, my everything.”

Heather Adams, whose son Seth survived the Marshall County High School shooting **near Benton, Ky.** on January 23, 2018, recalled the hours of uncertainty: panicking, unanswered texts, rushing to the school, pacing, praying. As she recounted her story, she echoed what so many parents describe. Parents refreshing their phones, willing that read receipt to appear, just to feel the vibration of a returned text in their palm.

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But Heather's story wasn't just about her own child. She spent the better part of that terrible day comforting a woman she would later learn was the shooter's mother. That woman had no idea her son was responsible — she had shown up at the school just like every other parent, terrified and praying her child was safe.

Even after the truth came out, Heather treated her with compassion. The sins of the child. The sins of the parent. Still, kindness. Because sometimes, when grief is shared, there's room for grace.

These are just a few of the many stories Amye and I collected while editing "If I Don't Make It, I Love You" — a project that brought together survivors, parents, teachers and first responders from across the country.

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Cloi Henke was a freshman at Marshall County High School when a 15-year-old student opened fire in an open area of the school, killing 2 students and injuring 14 others. Cloi remembered “Waiting to know who pulled the gun. Who was injured. Who didn’t make it. Waiting and praying. Praying and waiting.”

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Twenty-six years ago at Columbine in suburban Denver, Jami Amo watched as families waited outside the elementary school for survivors to be named. Some names never came. As night fell, a dozen families still lingered in the dark. Their children were not coming home.

Ted Zocco-Hochhalter was across the country when his daughter, Anne Marie, was critically injured in the **Columbine shooting**. His wife, Carla — Anne Marie’s mother — took her own life six months later. Ted

described being trapped in an airport boarding area, watching the news unfold on screens: “I had trouble breathing. The fear, concern, and helplessness exacerbated my need to get home... it was as if there was a timer, an hourglass in my brain and it was quickly draining of sand.”

When he finally reached Carla on a pay phone, she told him Anne Marie had been shot in the chest — not the ankle, as early reports claimed. And they still didn’t know where their son Nathan was. “I didn’t know if Carla could handle anything more serious.”

At Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, Ca. in 1989, teacher Julia Schardt recalled a surreal, blood-splattered hallway and the eerie quiet of students lining up to reunite with their families. Hundreds of parents stood outside, scanning each child’s face, hoping for the only reunion that mattered: their own.

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Julia also told me about Amy, a 6th grade student in a portable classroom facing the playground. The older students were still inside, waiting for lunchtime, when the firecrackers they thought they heard became the sound of bullets. Amy and her classmates watched through the window as the shooter sprayed bullets back and forth across the playground. The shots hit tetherball poles and ricocheted toward the school. They tore through the building, sending clouds of soundproofing material through kindergarten classrooms.

The bullets also went through children. Amy and her classmates saw it happen — and then saw the shooter put a bullet through his own head.

When the shooting stopped, Amy's teacher lined up the class to walk them to the multi-purpose room where they would be reunited with their parents. But Amy wasn't sure a safe place even existed anymore. She grabbed a pair of art scissors — right-handed scissors, though she was left-handed — just in case. She wondered: Would they work if I need them?

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Loren Lieb, whose son Josh was **shot at a Jewish community center** in Los Angeles in 1999, remembered the long hours before she was reunited with her older son, Seth, who had been evacuated. She wondered: Did he know what happened to his brother? Did he wonder why they hadn't come for him?

Dr. Reema Kar, now a trauma surgeon and assistant professor of surgery at Johns Hopkins, was a medical student the day of the Amish schoolhouse shooting in Nickel Mines, Pa. She recounted the experience of watching three little girls with gunshot wounds arrive at the emergency room at Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. "I stood aside, waiting for instructions, letting the surgeons and doctors control the chaos. In a blur of minutes that felt like hours, the various teams rushed to secure airways, stabilize vital signs, and care for bleeding gunshot wounds. As a young medical student, there was little I could actually do. I simply did not have the training to help. It felt as though the world was spinning around me, but that I had stopped, suspended in time in the midst of that unthinkable tragedy, utterly powerless to do anything."

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Gun Violence Awareness Month isn't just about statistics or slogans. It's about time. Time lost. Time suspended. Time that traumatizes.

While we debate laws and argue politics, what we don't discuss enough is the stillness of reunification centers. The buzz of unanswered phones. The crowd of parents outside a school building, daring to hope, dreading what they might hear.

This year, we've already seen how the cycle repeats:

On June 1, a high school house party in Hickory, North Carolina, **ended in gunfire**, killing one and injuring eleven others — many of them students.

On May 20, a man **opened fire** outside a track meet in Washington, D.C., sparking panic and renewed calls for school event security.

On April 17, two students were killed in **a shooting** at Florida State University's student union.

In San Antonio, a mother was charged with **helping her son** purchase ammunition and tactical gear.

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The places and dates change. The waiting doesn't.

And still, Mitchell shares, "I'm grieving for Nick. Nick is just . . . he's a presence, man."

To wait is a privilege. To wait and know your child is safe, to know they are coming home — that is a blessing. And we are losing that gift in this country, again and again.

Let's do more than pause. Let's build a world where no one waits in vain. Where no one texts their child goodbye. Where we do more than hope. Where we act—by paying attention, by asking hard questions, by believing survivors, and by refusing to wait until it happens again.

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By **LOREN KLEINMAN**

Loren Kleinman's nonfiction has appeared in the New York Times, USA Today, Huffington Post, Ms. Magazine and other publications. Her poetry collection "The Dark Cave Between My Ribs" was named one of the best poetry books of 2014 by Entropy Magazine.

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