

Kids are not a currency for freedom

By Karrie Carlson Daily Journal Media Sep. 20, 2025

Stepping out of my car I knew this experience would change me to my very core. How do you walk up to the site where two children were murdered and not leave a different person? I knew it would be somber, heavy and outright maddening that such a crime scene exists at all. But I had to see it.

I want to be clear — this column is not about politics, gun control, right-side, left-side, religion, gender or any other single thing that divides groups of people into bickering factions. It's about the human race and how we will never benefit from the wonderful things these kids, and all victims of violence that came before them, would have achieved had they gotten the simple privilege of staying alive. It is about kids, not characters in a book or movie — real kids — being shot.

I was in college the first time I consciously remember a school shooting. With no social media, internet or cell phones, my friends and I watched the scene unfold in Colorado at Columbine High School on TV. It was so confusing. Why would someone walk into a school and shoot people, let alone kids? What went wrong? It was paralyzing to watch and I know I spent far too many hours watching the news trying to wrap my young mind around it.

Since that spring day in 1999, I've seen it happen over and over. Innocent people doing regular things like going to school, seeing a movie, attending a live concert and spending time at their place of worship. Just living life. That's what was happening at Annunciation Catholic School in August. Kids, teachers, church and school staff were starting another school year.

When I drove to the church I thought there would be a few flowers still outside, maybe a card, a photo or stuffed animal. I was overwhelmed by the volume of support displayed beginning blocks away with blue and green ribbons around trees and sign posts.

I walked up to the front of the church and the smell of flowers was overpowering. There were buckets lining the entirety of the sidewalk on both sides that were holding numbers bouquets in each. Etched above a statue at the center front of the church are the words, "This is the house of God and the gate of Heaven." I could picture people happily and routinely going through the doors to worship, see school programs or watch loved ones celebrate milestones like weddings. What will that look like now? Will it feel safe again? Will it feel sacred again now that it has been breached by terror?

One of the first things I did was read all of the messages written in sidewalk chalk. They were comforting, encouraging and kind. There were also drawings of hearts, crosses and other symbols. Painted rocks, tiny rubber ducks and cross necklaces were placed by the buckets holding the flowers.

I walked around the building, along the side where the bullets had entered through the stained glass. Next to the windows that had been shot out, the long narrow gray boards that covered the open space until new glass was placed were leaning against the church. They were left there even after the repair because they had been marked in messages and scripture. Across from that is a wiffle ball diamond with a hand painted scoreboard. It somehow seems more gut wrenching to see the homemade sign. Green and blue ribbons hang on trees and fences.

A short flight of stairs leads to the back of the church where there is a quiet neighborhood with houses remarkably close. This is also where parking lots, a playground and a basketball court are that I recognize from the photos in the news of parents meeting up with their kids.

Next to a boarded up door I saw the words "Bless the little children" in chalk on the sidewalk. The sun shining that day made the remnants of broken glass at the base of the door catch my eye. When I approached the area, I could also see wax mounds and black wicks where candles had burned out of existence in remembrance of what happened there. Bricks that make up the building were sprinkled with chalk drawings of flowers. I got closer and realized that at the center of those colored flowers were marks from rounds of ammunition that peppered the church as the shooter made their way around. I could hear neighborhood kids playing in yards. The juxtaposition was a lot to take in.

At the very back of the church I met a woman, unnamed, who lives nearby. She told me her experiences from the day of the shooting. Her own kids go to Minneapolis public school and were at home that day because they hadn't started their school year yet. She heard about the shooting and ran home to "scoop up her kids." Once she saw they were safe she said she started helping in the area. She explained how the shooter had come up the street making first contact with the church in the very spot we were standing. She said it was at that spot, in front of a religious statue, where the shooting began. She asked if I wanted to see something that made the biggest impact on her kids. She walked me up to the statue and removed the flowers that were adorning it. There in the alabaster plaster were holes and black streaks from bullets. She explained that she and other volunteers placed the flowers in the holes to mask the ugliness of what had happened. When they started to wilt, they took new flowers from the buckets and replaced them with the fresh ones. That's what she was doing when I walked by.

Once I was back at the front of the church I went to the area of one of the two main doors. There were two crosses, each with the name of a student who had lost their life in the attack— Fletcher Merkel, age 8, and Harper Moyski, age 10. A large stuffed bear against the door holds a photo of each of them—eyes sparkling and smiles bright. A football, angel statuettes, cards colored with crayons and a sign made on paper with a marker that said "Fletcher I love you always and forever, Mom" reminded me painfully that these were kids.

I was given one green and one blue ribbon by students at a small table before I walked to my car. Before I drove away, I had to sit for a few minutes and just be in that moment. My mind and my heart hurt, neither could fully accept what I had just seen.

As I drove home from Minneapolis I took the time to be in silence and process it all. I've worked with kids in many settings, including church and schools. Sweaty, giggly, hair-uncombed, shoes-untied kids. These could be kids from anywhere in the world. My kids. Your kids. These were our kids. We all have the responsibility to protect all of our kids. The adage, "it takes a village" doesn't specify a religion or political party. We, as humans, can do better. We have to do better. Kids in prayer are not a price owed for the right to own a weapon. There has to be change.