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When Someone Asks Where I'm From

Author Bio

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When Someone Asks Where I'm From

PHOEBE M. DOSCHER

When someone asks where I'm from, I brace myself for impact as "Sandy Hook" escapes my lips and I set off a potential flurry of questions, commiserations, and utter shock as those charged words buzz midair.

I've always felt that maybe I shouldn't mention my hometown in fear of tainting a perfectly normal conversation, so I used to try to brush off the tragedy by giving some snappy, rehearsed bit about our resiliency, smile, and move on. But, once I was thrust into a college setting and repeatedly reminded of the public familiarity with the town, that approach made me feel excruciatingly stuck. Merely bringing up Sandy Hook, not to mention revealing that my sister is a survivor, is enough to bring tears to people's eyes. Friends tell their families that they know someone from Sandy Hook. They're taken aback and give me shocked looks. They ask if I'm from *the* Sandy Hook, and when I confirm, I feel the weight of my shocking past hitting them while the urgency for real action and real change is ready to explode from inside my chest. Until now, I've only yearned to tell others about the difference I'm making in response to the tragedy, rather than simply acknowledge the appalling event.

When I tell someone where I'm from, I hope to do more than offer them a window into an irreversible part of my upbringing with the hope that some kind of change, or at least an altered perspective, will spar from this unthinkable reality. Seven years out, I meet the astonished looks, tears, and condolences and say, yes, I'm from Sandy Hook, and I see injustice and want to put an end to gun violence in our nation. So, I'm fighting back, and here's my story.

I woke on the morning of December 14th, 2012 just like anyone else. I ate breakfast, said goodbye to my mom before she woke my sister up, and my dad allowed me to listen to my favorite pop radio station while he drove me to middle school. Beyond that, I don't remember any of the specific moments leading up to the tragedy because they seemed too mundane to me, too commonplace to burn into memory; that is, until the lockdown began. I vividly recall cramming myself under a long lab table in my seventh-grade science classroom. I

thought it was a drill. It felt like a drill for the first five minutes. Then, we began to feel too cramped and uncomfortable. Maybe a bear was roaming the streets of Newtown. Maybe a rabid animal was on the loose or the local bank had been robbed. Not once did my mind go to the worst; I hadn't even begun to fathom the thought of a school shooting.

We sat for a while. The teacher's aide snuck out of her hiding place to collect our lab notebooks from the tables, one by one, and passed them around so we could doodle or play games. Unbeknownst to us, mere miles away, horror unfolded at the elementary school. Children and educators risked and lost their lives while we sat on cold tile, shoulder-to-shoulder, playing hangman and tic-tac-toe.

The lockdown ended. We were released from the classroom and all I remember is a blur of movement in the halls. I emerged from the stuffy room and stretched my sore body. We weren't allowed phones in my class, except for the teachers, whom I later realized had been receiving messages and calls, attempting to cover up their stunned faces as the news unfolded. Some students, however, had their phones on them.

"There was a shooting," I heard students say as I passed through the halls. "Sandy Hook Elementary School." My ears perked up. My sister's at Sandy Hook, I thought. "I think the principal died," someone said, and at that point, I quit listening to their accusations. There was no way the principal could've died. What even was a shooting, anyway? At the time, I pictured a freak accident of a hunter shooting into a field, and maybe, just maybe, the principal had been caught in the accident, somehow. But it all seemed too far-fetched to understand. I couldn't wrap my brain around the piecemeal developments. We all, essentially, knew nothing.

The teachers attempted to resume classes with business as usual. Regardless of the ominous murmurs, we were still at school, and had to wait to hear definitive developments of the mysterious lockdown.

Back in the science classroom, the whisper of "Sandy Hook School" in the hallway irked me. I wanted to leave, or at least find someone who knew what was really going on, so I stood up, too distracted to work, while the rest of the students remained seated. Some kids made odd looks at me or tried to bring my attention back, but I remained standing, paralyzed, until my teacher received a call that my dad had come to pick me up. I gathered my things and rushed out of the classroom. The air had shifted around me and my breathing was short and labored. I could almost sense the palpable wrongness in the

air.

When my dad arrived at the school, we hugged in breathless reunion and rushed to the car, my mind a flurry of confusion. I asked question upon question. All he could assure me was that my sister was safe; she was at home and had survived what was supposed to be a normal day in elementary school.

Helicopters chopped the air above my house when we pulled into the driveway. It was a brisk winter day, but the front door was left open in the commotion. We live close to the school, so we could hear distant sirens underscored by the television, blaring breaking news of a shooting in Connecticut. It was a little moment of fame for our small town—unsolicited, undesirable fame.

My mom tore her attention from the television long enough to squeeze me before pointing to my sister in the other room, who was occupied with toys and movies. My movements robotic, I ran in and hugged her involuntarily, suddenly wishing to be closer to her than ever before. She seemed so small, so changed. We later learned that her brain had shielded her from fully processing much of the day's events, but in the moment, I knowingly embraced her for all I knew and had yet to know about the shooting.

As the night continued, learned what it was like to see adults cry, even sob, right in the open. I also learned how a family operates in a constant state of uncertainty; for us, that involved pasta. My mom made a huge pot of pasta and red sauce to accommodate other families of Sandy Hook students with whom we'd teamed up to traverse this uncharted territory.

In one of those families was my best friend who was the same age as me and had been my companion throughout all of our years at Sandy Hook Elementary and the years to follow. Our sisters, the same age apart from us, similarly became the best of friends, and would both brandish the labels of survivors after that day's massacre. I sat with my friend in the living room that night unpacking the facts. We heard murmurs about first grade classes, casualties, and, of course, the principal. At that point, no one had confirmed the reality neither of us could conjure up.

The two of us continued back and forth, both barely even teenagers, and attempted to hold adult-like conversation while our traumatized siblings played with dolls in the other room. We couldn't piece enough facts together to hold a real conversation, so we kept going back to something we all could agree on: There was no way this could've happened. Yet, it had.

My story is just one of many within the Sandy Hook community and communities around the country. Mine is also a story of a family with a surviving child. We experienced trauma, yes, but I can't speak for the unfathomable loss of the families of 20 first graders and six educators who did not bring home their loved ones that day, or the numerous families shattered on a daily basis by the deadly toll of gun violence.

Although I did not know any of the victims on a close personal basis, I still think of them and their families all the time and I can't begin to imagine the ongoing heartbreak those families endure. They walk among us, though, and the impact of this tragedy has sparked the founding of numerous gun violence prevention organizations and campaigns—many of which are driven by victims' families and continue to inspire my own advocacy as the leader of a gun violence prevention organization on Gettysburg's campus.

In this gun violence prevention fight, it's important to return to the "why." I often remind myself to think about my actions from that angle: "Why am I organizing with students?" "Why are we writing letters to state representatives and senators?" "Why are we holding a vigil?" And the answer is to honor victims and to work towards preventing even more Americans—more than the 26 in my hometown, or the 100 that die each day—from also becoming victim to this national issue.

In December of 2019, over 700,000 Americans were reported to have lost their lives or have been injured by guns since the tragedy in my town seven years prior. Gun violence-sparked narratives similar to my own unfold for more and more people every day, regardless of the jarring loss of children and educators at an elementary school in 2012, and the tragedies both before and since then.

Within merely the first six days of 2020, our nation lost 613 victims to gun violence. In 2019, a reported 15,668 individuals endured gun deaths. Change is coming, yes, but so is more inevitable violence that drives me to work even harder to find solutions to this issue.

We wouldn't need gun violence prevention advocacy if there weren't so many gun deaths in this country. In fact, I wish I didn't have a reason to band together with students to take action to save lives. Yet, we stand; some of us are inspired to fight after experiencing tragedies close to us, and others, though unaffected, still feel the urgency of the issue and cannot spend a moment longer in silence. We speak out

to ensure that the lives of victims do not go unremembered and that no one from this point on must lose their life, be wounded, survive and be traumatized, or be a part of communities that are forever changed by gun violence.

Now, when someone asks me where I'm from, I no longer feel stuck. I've responded to the reminders I face of the fear and trauma that results from a gun violence tragedy by taking actions with my community to ensure that no life goes unremembered and no shooting is unacknowledged. My hometown is certainly not the only one that takes people aback; more and more communities every day are recognized as locations of gun violence, and that is not right.

So, I will fight, and I will do whatever it takes to end gun violence for as long as it takes. I just hope I'm not a victim myself before I can witness a safer nation.