

SEEING WHAT ADULTS DON'T SEE



A call to action and seeing what adults don't see.

For hundreds of thousands of high school students, the events that followed the Parkland High School shooting (and now, the Santa Fe High School shooting, which is within the bounds of Synod of the Sun) was a clarion call to action. The March for Our Lives, which occurred on March 24th in Washington D.C. and in locations around the U.S., brought students out to protest and demand action.

Nearly one month later on April 20th, students walked out of their schools in the middle of the school day on the 19th anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting. With periods of silence, speeches and protests, the students once again called for action.

Like many students, Presbyterian youth took to the streets and campus lawns. For Michael Watson, Senior at Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas, TX and member at Northridge Presbyterian Church in Dallas, his call to action was to attend meetings, organize a walk out, and become a voter registrar.

"It started out the week after Parkland. I e-mailed my principal out of a concern for school safety. There were a lot of things I thought the school could do better, from a student's perspective. Administrators often don't see what students see" said Watson.

As a result of that inquiry, his principal invited Michael to attend a DISD event that addressed the Parkland shooting. What impressed him the most was the unified message of participants from many socio-economic backgrounds. After that, Michael and other WWHS students met with the principal and brought up the walk out. From that point on, the students planned out the event and executed it.

"The whole walkout wasn't just for school safety," said Watson. "It was more for educating students about gun violence. We talked about background checks, arming teachers, safety... all of the issues."

"There are a couple of issues that are thoughtful: Gun control, which is mostly from Democrats and mental health issues, which is brought up by Republicans. A big part of this discussion is that we need universal background checks, stricter gun control in many forms. Mental health is also a big part. There is a lot of stress in high school and middle school. I'm thankful that DISD is implementing programs for anger de-escalation" said Watson. "If we were all nicer to each other and had a little more awareness, and people knew how to cope with emotions, if that came from religion or meditation, that would help. The main issue for me is gun control, that the means to shoot-up schools would be lessened."

Seventeen Minutes to Change the Environment

Sophomore Ella Walters, student at Fort Worth Academy of Fine Arts and member of First Presbyterian Church in Grapevine, TX, also participated in the Columbine Walkout.

“Since our school is so small, there were no real planned activities. Most of the teachers and the principal agreed with the students that wanted to participate” said Walters. “I was in my Stagecraft class. That teacher is a little more conservative and she cried a little when we left. We walked out into this green area, maybe about 30 to 40 students walked out. We stayed silent for 17 minutes (for Parkland). Afterwards, our Principal talked to us about how he was proud he was that we know how to protest.”

“For me, it’s a bigger issue than just kids being nicer to each other. Of course, in general, we should be more Jesus-like. But I think this is on a higher level than that. You can’t bubble every teenager into one person. Everyone’s different and not everyone is going to get along all the time and that’s okay. That’s how we’re made to be. It’s better to change the environment that we’re struggling in,” said Walters.

Overcoming Numbness

Because of instantaneous news and opinion plus the frequency of mass shootings, many adolescents have become numb to the incidents that occur, until that event touches someone in their sphere of influence. Then their perspective changes.

“Before the school shootings, I would hear about mass shootings and think ‘Oh, that’s scary’, but I didn’t really understand it and I didn’t form my opinions and beliefs on it. All I knew was that it was scary and kids shouldn’t be dying,” said Walters. “But more recently, with the Santa Fe shootings, it’s really had an impact on me. For my English teacher, her nephew was on a bus to elementary school in Santa Fe. His bus had to be stopped so the SWAT team could get in. I was in her class while all of that was happening. That put it all into perspective for me. It’s now close to me, it could happen to me here.”

“It doesn’t matter where you are, it could happen to anyone. That has been on everyone’s mind for the past week” said Ella.

For both Michael and Ella, their moral compass has come into play. “The reason for doing this came from my moral beliefs. My involvement was thinking that something had to be done. It was important” said Watson.

“In the background, my faith had a part of in it. Because my faith affects everything I do, my morals and what I believe in, outside of believing in my faith. So, I don’t think I necessarily had it in mind while making the decision, but it was my reason for doing so” said Walters.

“Teenagers have shed a great deal of light on the subject. We need to be nicer, to be nice neighbors, to those you may not want to be nice to and to not bully others. We need to go vote. Find out what the candidates believe in” said Michael, who has become a registered voter. He also has become a voter registrar. “We had a runoff election in Dallas recently. It was on a weekday and the polls close in the early evening. That’s a big issue to a lot of people who can’t get to the polls. There’s a lot of things that go against people’s access to voting.”



Sorrow and Excitement - Anger and Resolve

As a result of attending the March for Our Lives in Ft. Worth, Ella has become inspired, but also has a deeper sense of the tragedy.

“The March for Our Lives was very empowering and especially for me as a female student. All of the speakers were students and I wanted to go up there. Most adults don’t know what it’s like to be a high school student in a time like this. Not a lot of light was being shed on this, but most of the victims were women and it was very empowering to hear voices like mine who were sharing their experiences, how they were affected. That was important to me.”

Ella continued: “The March was a weird experience for me. It was a mix of emotions. I was terribly angry and upset about what’s going on, but I was also happy and excited that all these people were getting together for something that we believe in and is important. I remember thinking ‘Why am I so excited to be here?’ I realize it’s because I like to be a part of it, to talk about what I believe in and relate to these people who come together as a whole to speak out.”

“These past couple of months have been very thought provoking. I’ve been thinking everyday about what I can do and who I want to be in this movement, in this change that’s going on” said Walters. “At least for now, it has changed the art that I make. I’ve made two pieces about gun violence. This makes me change about what I want to do and what I want to produce. What I really want to do with the resources that I have, the choices that I make.”