

WARRIOR STRONG

Tears, pain and progress in creating a stronger Warrior community

Born in the wake of tragedy, the annual Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness Week offers an opportunity for students and staff to remember the past, but also to look forward to a path of practicing kindness all year long.

By Anna Olson
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Photos by Karl Gehring



THE DAY

The events of Friday, Dec. 13, 2013 forever changed the structure of Arapahoe's security and safety. What seemed like a normal school day turned into a day that will forever be remembered by the Arapahoe community.

Eighty seconds. That's all it took to send Arapahoe High School into chaos on Dec. 13, 2013, when senior Claire Davis was shot by another student.

On a seemingly normal Friday early afternoon, students were in class or preparing for finals when Karl Pierson, a senior at the time, entered the school through the Forum doors carrying a shotgun and a backpack that held a machete and three Molotov cocktails.

Pierson shot Davis, who was sitting on a bench with a friend near the science wing, before taking his own life in the library. She died on Dec. 21, 2013.

It has now been 10 years since the tragic event took place. And also 10 years of acceptance, growth and strengthening in the community.

'Messages of love and kindness'

One year after the shooting, Arapahoe started the tradition of Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness Week.

Assistant Principal Abby Kuhlmann, an English teacher at the time of the shooting, says the idea for the week was developed by a committee of administrators, parents and students.

"After we had heard from the Davis family about their messages of love and kindness and after our community had come back together, we really were focusing on this healing component of it," she said.

To some students, this week may seem like just another spirit week, but its meaning stretches past that.

Principal Natalie Pramenko says the purpose of the week is not just to look back on the tragedy but also to ensure students feel connected to the school.

"We really try to focus on making sure our kids feel like they belong," she said.

Although there is a distance between current students and their connections to the shooting, Kuhlmann says the message of Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness Week hasn't changed for the staff members who were here 10 years ago.

"What I would love to see from students is just kind grace that week for their teachers," she said. "But then to also carry that message in their interactions with their peers of love and kindness."



A PHOTO OF Claire Davis being held up by the Arapahoe County Sheriff at a press conference on Dec. 14, 2013.

OVER 500 STUDENTS attended a candlelight vigil on Dec. 14, 2013. The event took place at Arapaho Park and supplies for the event were donated by local businesses. The Arapahoe community really came together at a time when it was needed where they shared prayers for Claire and held up candles.



Brad Meyer, Social Studies

'I put it on my arm to take my room back.'

Social studies teacher Brad Meyer was holding a normal class on Dec. 13, 2013, preparing for finals.

Then two shots went off down the hallway.

"Within an instant, kids looked at me and I looked at them," he said. "We knew what it was."

Meyer played a role that day as not only a teacher but also a father, as his daughter was a student in the building. With no contact for five hours following the shooting, it wasn't until he was moved to a nearby church that he finally saw her at 7 p.m.

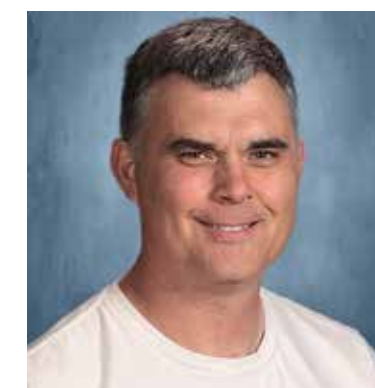
"Once we got over there, I went from being a teacher to a dad," he said.

The investigation showed shooter Karl Pierson had room numbers written on his arm as places he intended to target, one of which being Meyer's.

After the shooting, several AHS staff members and students got tattoos at a fundraiser as a remembrance of the day. Meyer chose to get his room number tattooed on his arm.

"I put it on my arm to take my room back," he said.

more from Brad Meyer and Adam Wallace on the ArapahoeXtra Website



Adam Wallace, Science

'I've never seen so much support coming out of it.'

Science teacher Adam Wallace was in class when he heard the shots and, at first, thought it came from a chemistry classroom.

But when he walked down the hall to check it out, he quickly discovered what had taken place.

Ten years later, Wallace says the events ultimately brought the Arapahoe community closer together.

"Unfortunately, it has put us into a club now—that of school shootings," he said. "It's something nobody wants to belong to." Still, he adds, "I've never seen so much support coming out of it."

Wallace says processing and reflecting on the events has made him really try to find the joys in life and live life to the fullest as much as he can. He also tries to encourage kids to understand things will get better.

"If you don't like high school, then work as hard as you can to get out of high school and go do something that you love," he said. "If you don't have friends here, there are 8 billion people on this planet. ... Go out in the world and find your peeps. That's a lesson I've gotten out of this whole thing."

LOVE AND KINDNESS

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Impacts on mental health

According to the Washington Post, 389 school shootings have taken place since the 1999 Columbine massacre.

Nate Thompson, the LPS Director of Social, Emotional and Behavioral Services, says the increase of school shootings can affect students' mental health.

"Today's kids have to deal with some of those fears in a way that a lot of us didn't when we were growing up, because schools are also becoming more prepared and taking precautions," he said.

Thompson said that over the past 10 years, about 30 more mental health programs have been added in the district.

"We also have spent a lot of time trying to help teachers and staff to know how to support kids and what to do if they're worried about their mental health," he said, "as well as really trying to promote ways that kids can get support for themselves or for others."

Regardless of school shootings, just the social aspects of high school can also have a big impact on mental health, Kuhlmann says.

"I know that sometimes high school cannot be a loving or kind place, just for whatever reason," she said. "There are some dynamics that sometimes make high school kind of tricky when it comes to that socially. And so my hope would be that

Current Warriors on what the Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness Week means to them

"The Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness Week is a great way to spread positivity and promote community engagement in a time where it is needed most."

— Ryan Velenski, 12

"I'm looking forward to the fun traditions that surround this week and I think this week is a great way to show love and kindness as a community."

— Meghan Edwards, 9

"I think Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness is a great tradition and it adds to AHS. I am really glad that we honor Claire Davis with this awesome tradition, and I think that we could even do more than we do now to honor the idea of kindness."

— Jack Ballard, 11

"I think the Miracle Minute and the toy drive are great ways of showing deliberate acts of love and kindness and are a great way to honor Claire."

— Annalise Cote, 10

kids could drop that at the door for at least a week."

Pramenko says the school really wants to hone in on love and kindness because it helps not only with students' mental health but also the staff's.

"I love watching our kids and staff just be kind to each other and support each other no matter where it is," she said. "Seeing other kids lift other kids up – it makes my day and warms my heart. That's why I do what I do."

English teacher Maura Moritz says that ever since the shooting, love and kindness has been, and will continue to be, something that should be

spread around the school. "There's not enough love and kindness," she said. "And so I think Arapahoe deciding to turn in that direction was a really good choice."

Thompson says that he is really proud of how much progress Arapahoe has made in the past 10 years.

"What we know is that mental health and trusting relationships and peer relationships are really important for kids to be well," he said. "And some of that comes out of what we learned from the shooting in terms of what's really important to build a school culture."

“**Seeing kids lift other kids up – it makes my day and warms my heart. That’s why I do what I do.**”

— Natalie Pramenko



COMMENTARY: COMBATING FEAR WITH HOPE

By Emma Daberkow

It has been 10 years since the school shooting which claimed the life of an Arapahoe High School student. With the week of acts of kindness, we remember the life of Claire Davis, whose life was cut short due to gun violence.

Ten years ago, our school was filled with fear and uncertainty during this tragic event. Unfortunately, school shootings are still a part of many American students' and each other's lives, even years after this act of violence.

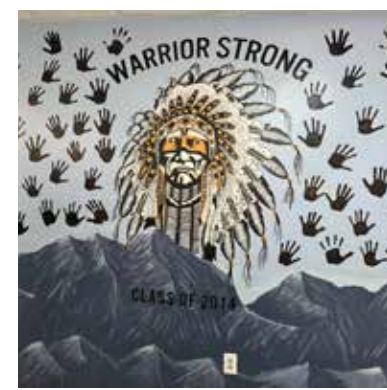
Countless American high schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools have

fallen victim to gun violence. Many American students and teachers across the nation also report feeling unsafe in their own schools. So why do we do the week of kindness? How does this help at all?

Although we may be unable to change laws surrounding gun safety, we can combat fear with our greatest weapon – hope.

Deliberate Acts of Love and Kindness is a week to remember those we lost and to provide hope in our darkest moments. It is to create a sense of community and show how we are stronger when we are united.

PEOPLE VISIT THE MEMORIAL which was started on the west parking lot fence to commemorate Claire. The fence along Dry Creek Road was filled with balloons, posters, and other items as a tribute to Claire. One of the balloons on the fence read "We are Warrior Strong." There were other messages on the fence like "Pray 4 Claire" and "Warrior Strong Hope Love."



Maura Moritz, English

'Everybody had to be a part of the mural.'

When students returned to school in January 2014 following the shooting, English teacher Maura Moritz and her senior World Literature class decided to paint a mural in the back of her classroom as a way to come together and heal.

The mural features a Warrior head with the message "Warrior Strong," as well as a mountain range and handprints.

"Everybody had to be a part of the mural," she said. "They all put their hands [on the wall] and they could write anything they wanted in their handprint. They could write what they were doing in their future, they could write about memories of Arapahoe, it didn't matter."

The project took about six weeks, and at the end of the school year, the class held a commemoration.

Moritz, who has been teaching at AHS for 26 years, says the greater community really came together after the tragedy.

"The community really picked us up," she said. "Every day, there was food from somewhere for the staff. ... It was lovely and people were nice but it was a jarring moment in my career for sure."

“**Everybody had to be a part of the mural. They all put their hands [on the wall] and they could write anything they wanted in their hand print.**”

— Maura Moritz