

## **The Role of a Journalist: Exposing the Epidemic of Gun Violence by Rebecca Schneid**

One of the first movies that I ever saw that exposed me to the world of journalism was *Spotlight* (2015). I watched it on my computer when I was 14, and the narrative immediately captivated me. As a huge fan of movies, I have always looked for diversity in entertainment- movies that showed the different and sometimes troubling experiences of people in the world, and *Spotlight* was the perfect example. It depicted the story of Boston *Globe* reporters who worked tirelessly to expose the Catholic Church's attempts to hide child-molesting priests from the public.

I remember thinking, "Yes! This is the kind of thing I want to do. I want to show the world the injustices they can't see. I want to make a difference like they did." Fast forward to this past January in AP US History Class. We were learning about the Progressive Era of American history, where investigative journalists called "muckrakers" would rake up the dirt of American society and expose it to the world. One month later, I became intimately aware of a specific epidemic plaguing this country: gun violence.

When we began reporting about our school after the shooting—including the walkout and the march, it was our top priority to uphold the highest journalistic standards by remaining as impartial as possible. We felt a responsibility to report the facts of what happened at our school as we knew them from the inside, and to correct the public record that was so skewed by misinformation. As we did our work, we also came to realize the power of the platform that we had.

*The Eagle Eye* was now in the spotlight, especially after our memorial issue came out. People were actually listening to us, both as individual survivors of a school shooting

and as the newspaper of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. So, we came to realize we had a duty to discuss the epidemic that had left our community broken. We researched and researched and became knowledgeable about the statistics, causes, and laws addressing gun violence.

As victims of this horrible massacre, we had a unique perspective on this issue, and it was important to present an insiders' view of not just the facts about gun violence and its causes, but the impact on survivors—an ever-growing group. We also wanted to write about the laws addressing mental health, gun control, and school safety—what they currently are, what they've been in the past, and how they could change to prevent what happened to Stoneman Douglas from happening to another community.

Just as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* exposed the abuses of factory laborers and the gross reality of the meat-packing industry, we wanted to shed light on the truth about gun violence in this country. We wanted the world to see that even when the news cameras fade away, the trauma of gun violence remains in every place it tore through. Not only that, we wanted to share our spotlight with the hundreds of other communities across the nation that had to combat and live with gun violence on their streets every single day.

We used infographics, partnerships with larger newspapers, and public activism to demonstrate to the people watching that *this was not normal*. And, that is a fact.

So, from there we used our platform to raise the voices of our classmates, peers, and strangers alike, all who had a perspective on this issue. Conservative or liberal, it became clear that all in this nation want to see an end to this epidemic (I call it that because it kills 96 people every day). And just like any epidemic, it can be cured. The issue is that each of these perspectives seeks a different treatment. Some say that gun

control is the only cure, while others advocate for school safety. We wanted to give advocates for each of these perspectives the opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions, while at the same time presenting the facts of the situation at hand.

From the beginning, Ms. Falkowski set an amazing example for us. She started speaking out on the day of the shooting, just as angry as the rest of us that this was able to happen at our school. She took the lead, making sure we understood our role and responsibility as the reporters for our school newspaper. She pushed us toward excellence when writing and designing our memorial issue, our activism special issue called “Taking a Stand,” and our online stories. Without her fierce leadership, we would never have had the courage to use our newspaper and our reporting to educate and influence others.

This happened to our school, and this was *our* story. So, we wanted to be the ones to tell it. We raised the voices of our peers and exposed gun violence for what it truly was: a disease. *The Eagle Eye* will continue to be the voice for MSD High School, as our activism continues.

## **From Victims to Villains by Rebecca Schneid**

We never wanted this attention, this fame. That is the first thing you need to know about all of us. Every single person in this school who received opportunities after the murder of our 17 classmates and faculty members would give everything back for this never to have happened. Often, my friends and I find ourselves reminiscing about fun memories mere weeks before the tragedy. And, though we realize that we had our own issues, insecurities, and sadness back then, it wasn't anything compared to this--this hollowness we feel. We are seeing significant changes as a result of our work, not just in the form of policy, but also within the minds of our nation's constituents.

The only people who understand the pain and anguish that led us into action are our fellow peers. But, so many others refused to see us as anything other than nuisances, and as a result, did whatever they could to tear us down. Mere days after the shooting, we were being called "opportunists," and were being accused of "taking the deaths of our friends and twisting it." It seemed like one day we were victims to be pitied by all of America, and then the next, we were enemies of half the country. Sometimes we were called communists. Other times we were labeled crisis actors. Then with head-spinning speed, memes and tweets appeared accusing us of trying to rip up the Constitution (literally and figurative). Confusingly, we were also shown as blubbing idiots with no knowledge of politics or the world around us. The criticism, most of which were more like hurled insults with the purpose of causing us pain, seemed never ending.

My first experiences with the villainization of my classmates didn't come as personal attack against me, but rather were direct hits on my closest friends who were out in the

spotlight. My friends, who I had been in school with for years and years, were now accusing of being actors playing a role for the far left, or whoever employed them to participate in this false performance about a school shooting that didn't actually happen.

Oh, how I wish that that was the truth. I wish more than anything that this shooting was a lie; that my friends and I were hired to speak about our trauma for a political purpose. That we were actually actors getting paid for the tears we shed every single day. But that isn't the truth. The truth is that we *did* go through a shooting that many of us *did* hide and run for our lives. The truth is that our friends *were* murdered in front of many of us. The truth is that many of us left school on Valentine's Day covered in our classmates' blood. No, that was not CGI or special effects trickery for a movie. It was all real, it was bloody, and it was a massacre. I would give everything I have for it to have been made up.

Those were some of the initial assaults used to distract the public from the message we were sending out, but they would certainly not be the last. One friend would sometimes cry to me about how people would brutally criticize her looks when she went on television to advocate for a safer future, something she was already insecure about. Emma Gonzalez was criticized for her sexuality and appearance. David Hogg's face was put onto a shooting target and actually shot at in a video posted on twitter. Delaney Tarr was sent hate mail calling her vulgar, despicable names. I talk about these bluntly because not only am I sure most of those following this issue have seen these attacks, but also because they are simple facts of how we have been victimized again after the shooting.

I would see the posts on twitter and think: *Do these people think this is an appropriate way to speak to another human, let alone a teenage survivor of gun violence?* I was appalled to say the least, but I honestly did not let myself dwell on it too much. I showed anger online and was obviously upset, but realized it was the work of the trolls that I had come to know throughout my experience online.

But, soon that attitude would change when a similar relentless hate campaign was directed toward me. I made a few appearances on TV shows like CNN's *Reliable Sources* and MSNBC in the days following the March For Our Lives, talking about how our *Eagle Eye* reporters have been covering the march and how the students hope to move forward with our activism by focusing on motivating young people to register and vote. Simply from the words "Stoneman Douglas student" appearing in front of my name, I received an onslaught of hate online, calling me anywhere from a "blubbering idiot," to a "controlling communist" (only one of which is true, by the way).

From my words on camera came almost 10,000 comments about how I was not, in fact, a reliable source (despite the name of the show), and had no validity. At a time when I was already struggling with the trauma and resulting heartbreak from the shooting, it was honestly the last thing I needed. I was already dealing with depression and anxiety, and then suddenly thousands of people spewed hateful things about my intelligence, looks, and home just from a few one-minute clips of me speaking on TV. Some of the comments were downright vulgar, making me wonder what kind of adult thinks it's okay to say such things to a 16-year-old shooting survivor, or a 16-year-old girl in general for that matter.

I was so confused. How did we as a community and March For Our Lives as an organization become the enemy of so many people for simply advocating for some change in the world? It became obvious to me then that people were not listening to what was being said at all and instead were making assumptions based on confirmation biases and fears about their rights.

So, this was where compartmentalization came in as a useful tool. In order for me to do my job at *The Eagle Eye* and make the impact I hoped to, I had to shut all of it out. My friends who had been dealing with these insults and gross distortions of their positions since the beginning taught me to place all of this negativity in a little box and lock it away. I knew it would only distract me from the end goal of preventing this violence from happening to anyone else's community, and I recognized that this was *exactly* the goal of trolls online. They made up these fake stories, these reasons to hate us, so that we could be ignored or dismissed. People wouldn't listen of our message if it was covered in so much BS to mask it, right?

The answer? Wrong. We have all used this gross falsification of our lives and our views as fuel, trying even more vigorously to get our message across so people see through these lies. This nonsense is just used to drag the eyes of the public away from what actually matters: the future. We refuse to let them win, always taking these smear stories and turning them back to our true mission of making our country a safer place for every man, woman, and child, and empowering our youth to use their voice and their rights. I have decided to focus on the immense amount of love we have received from around the world to energize me and push me to work even harder toward our goal. The hate would only get in my way, and we have too much to accomplish!

## **Coping with Trauma While Keeping Emotions in Check by Rebecca Schneid**

From the moment that this shooting occurred, I knew that newspaper would be immensely important in my healing process. The extent of it I did not yet understand, but I was immediately tied to it, as the newspaper room was where I was during the shooting. The class that was once my home became the sight of the most traumatic experience of my entire life. The closet where I used to go to eat lunch or watch videos with my friends was now the closet where I texted my mom goodbye, thinking I was going to die; it was the place I hugged my friends goodbye; it was the place that my best friend used my shirt to muffle her cries; it was the place that I lost all of my innocence.

Obviously, that event was extremely confusing and traumatizing. But, I still spend every day in the classroom, working on the newspaper that I love. And, every day I remember a new small thing from February 14th. Like, last week I remembered how I was watching Vine compilations with my friends Delaney and Emma minutes before the shooting. Or, I will remember running out of the room with my hands up, my Valentine's Day flowers in one hand, and my computer in the other. In the chaos, most times I forget why I took the flowers with me in the first place, but then I remember that I wanted something to remind me of light and love in a time of such darkness.

Essentially, that day will always be tied with Newspaper. Furthermore, my experiences after the shooting will always be tied with newspaper, since that is where I found my outlet. Immediately after the shooting, I drove home with my mom, sobbing uncontrollably, then sat in front of the television for about 12 hours straight, doing nothing but texting my friends to see who had died and who had survived, as I watched the events unfold on the news. There, I saw my newspaper teacher Ms. Falkowski, the

woman who hid me and 18 other students in her closet, keeping us calm and declining calls from her own mother in order to keep it together for us.

Mrs. Falkowski was the most selfless woman I have ever met or known, and there she was on television, continuing to sacrifice for her students in order to plead for change. That same night, I texted her one thing: “Thank you for all that you did for me. I promise you, we will use our newspaper to fight for the people we lost. We will use it to change the world.”

The next few days were a blur- vigils, and interviews, and rallies, and talk of the kind of change I never even could have dreamt of. But, soon I came back to reality with our first editorial meeting one week and one day after the shooting at MSD: we were the storytellers in this. This was our story to report, and it was our job to tell it. We not only were going to tell the story of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and the activism born out of it, we were all going to tell the stories of our fallen 17 fellow eagles in their honor.

So, in the midst of dealing with funerals, talks with politicians, interviews with TIME and the New York Times, a breakup, and PTSD symptoms, I was suddenly a journalist reporting on the tragedy at my school, involving my friends, and the death of my peers. I suddenly had a weight on my shoulder that I don't think I have ever felt in my entire life.

I had to do this school justice; I had to do these people justice.

Suddenly, I had about 1500 things on my plate on top of all of the rest. We had to write stories on the dozens of events going on around the school, anywhere from one on the mountains of mail we received from school around the country, to one on the survival

story of a student who was shot in the legs and had to run and hide for safety. The editors and I organized an entire new section of our website to funnel these stories into titled “MSD Strong.” On top of that, we had to scrap the entirety of our third quarter issue and start writing the memorial issue dedicated to the 17 people we lost. An issue that usually would take 8 weeks, we had to now do in about 3. I had to take pictures, and edit, and write three stories at once over and over again, not to mention the other non-newspaper related responsibilities I mentioned earlier.

Needless to say, I was drowning.

And still, I had yet to really address the emotions coursing through me. The day of the shooting, I had cried the entire ride home with my mom, still reeling from my hours in the closet, not knowing if I was going to die. But, after that I think I just felt numb. I boxed away everything that I felt for the shooting, for the trauma, because the second that I let myself feel, the second that I would become useless in this fight that we were working toward.

In relation to newspaper, a similar self-destructive philosophy applied. Every journalist knows that when dealing with extremely emotional topics (like the murder of 17 people), you need to compartmentalize and deal with some intense emotions. But, when this topic is *yours*? When this topic the murder of 17 people you know, and the trauma of you and your community? When the topic is your friends and family? That emotion obviously grows tenfold.

Immediately, I had to interview victims of the shooting, often friends of mine, and hear their stories of watching their friends die around them. I listened to them and pretended like I didn’t want to just sob uncontrollably.

For the memorial issue that the newspaper put out, I wrote (and wanted to write), the two stories honoring the victims Alaina Petty and Joaquin Oliver. Alaina was the sister of one of my close friends, someone I loved so dearly. The process of interviewing them, seeing them at their most vulnerable, yet still trying to keep an aura of professionalism and stoicism was one of the hardest things for me to navigate and understand.

I interviewed those from other states, and was also interviewed by those from other states. I had to listen to their misconstrued ideas of the weapon, event, and criminal that changed my life forever. These people had absolutely *no* idea what it was like to be us, and yet they all had opinions as to what we should do, should say, or should act like. It was all, to say the least, sensory overload.

For some background, I've always been a pretty sensitive person. When watching loud movies, I always plug my ears. It's something I have done since childhood. Loud noises, bright lights, and sudden touches- they all put me in a state of anxiety. And ever since the shooting, which provided me with the most intense sensory overload I had ever experienced, these experiences had worsened. Loud noises didn't just make me uncomfortable, they petrified me. Sirens and alarms didn't just make me cringe; they put me in a state of unbearable panic.

And now, suddenly every day, every moment of my life was a form of sensory overload. My inner fear and pain and grief was battling with my interactions every single moment of the day that I was participating in to reach my goals of change and awareness.

So, like any teenager wholly and completely unequipped to deal with the things I had to, I completely shut off. In order to accurately portray the lives of the victims in

newspaper as I was trying to do, and in order to focus on effectively changing things in this country, I tried to put myself and my emotions in a little bottle in my mind, locked away. Because, truthfully, how could I not? So many of my peers were trying to move on and trying to live their lives. But, I was saturated in it every single day. I was reading and writing stories about that day and the people we lost; I was researching the gun violence that affected me specifically. I saw everyday people saying vile and terrible things about my friends and I, simply for fighting for what we believed in and writing about it.

How could I comprehend all of those feelings: my dead friends, my ruined childhood, my decimated relationships, and my newfound purpose? My solution was to have no feelings at all. I didn't recognize what happened to me; let alone what happened to the people in the building mere yards away from me. Because the second that I did, I knew I would break. So, I made sure that I didn't. And honestly, it made me more productive and more able to fully write and speak. By locking my feelings in a box I couldn't reach, I didn't have to deal with them, and I didn't have to hurt as badly as I truly should have, feel as deeply as I deserved to, cry as hard as I wanted to.

Newspaper allowed me a place to release those feelings. I would have gone absolutely insane had I not been able to do so, even though I was not addressing them, I was writing and working and had found a purpose for myself to raise awareness about the plague that is gun violence.

It wasn't until the March For Our Lives that it actually hit me. Samantha Fuentes, a student who was shot on February 14th, was speaking, and she explained how that day was Nicolas Dworet, a victim's, birthday. I knew this fact, had seen it on twitter, but suddenly when 800,000 people on Pennsylvania Avenue, participating in a march that

was started by my friends, started singing “Happy Birthday” to my dead classmate, I realized how totally messed up this situation was. I started bawling, sobbing, and crying harder than I think I ever had. I could barely breathe. I couldn’t comprehend that I had been there that day, when seventeen people died. That happened to them, to *me*. There was a part of me that was so confused: it had been a month since this happened, so surely I was over it.

But, I had never really dealt with it in the first place. I had become so laser focused on what I wanted to accomplish that my compartmentalization of my feelings forbade me from feeling at all. And here I was, standing with my camera at March For Our Lives on Pennsylvania Avenue, my chest tight, my eyes sewn shut, wailing to the song “Happy Birthday” in my friend’s arms.

I suppose that’s when grief hits you- when you least expect it.

That was when I realized that while it was important to not explode from all of the emotions, it was also important to deal with them in a healthy way. And, admittedly, healthy is not my forte. But, I used newspaper as an outlet. I used journalism as an outlet.

While writing has so many amazing purposes to help others, it can also be an avenue to help yourself in the process. And self-care is something that I am still learning as I heal from February 14th and the subsequent days following. Yet, I am working hard every day to not only manage with the pressures of being a journalist of such important stories, but also manage the trauma that I have dealt with, and the concerns of being the teenager that I still am.