

Senate Judiciary Committee Statement
Statement of Ryan B. Petty
March 14, 2018

I will read a short statement from the families and then I will begin my personal statement.

We, the families of the amazing children and teachers killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day, would like to recognize the first responders who were witnesses that day to an unspeakable evil. Many acted heroically, putting themselves in harms way, and saved many lives that day. Thank you.

To the caring & gracious people of the cities of Parkland & Coral Springs, the citizens of our home state of Florida and those across America who have shown support for us in our time of sorrow and loss, we can only say, thank you. Please know that your kindness and support is deeply appreciated, and has made a lasting impact on our lives.

As families, we came from different backgrounds and we hold a variety of viewpoints; yet we united around this simple idea: our children and teachers should be safe at school. We rallied to the battle cry: This time must be different!

We implored our state leaders, and specifically the Florida Legislature, to take action.

We came together to build on common ground, and we made history in Florida by passing legislation to achieve a first step in just 3 weeks. It was a good start, but it is not enough – there is much more to be done.

Now my personal statement.

In a season of loss, it is difficult to find meaning in tragedy. The senseless murder of so many — including my own beloved daughter Alaina — tests the limits of faith, and demands more endurance than we thought possible. It is a test abruptly forced on us, and we bear it as best we can.

Each of us — mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives of those lost and loved — strive to find that meaning. I believe, we will be seeking it to the end of our days. However, our abiding faith tells us that our Father in Heaven has a plan. Although the loss of our daughter Alaina, was to us unforeseen, it was not a surprise to Him. This gives us comfort during this difficult time.

Our knowledge that at the end, when we each return to see our God, as we most surely will, He will grant us a full understanding — that when we see His face, we will, at long last, see the faces of our loved ones, taken from us too soon.

We will not know what all this means until that time.

But we know what this thing that has happened does not mean:

It does not mean evil will triumph.

It does not mean we may do nothing.

It does not mean we should turn against one another.

We must not struggle over ashes in the shadow of our grief.

So, instead of the media-fed, activist-inflamed, and politically aggravated din of the past month, I speak today about the real and substantive legislative and policy achievements in the State of Florida, earned at an unimaginable cost, that are already making our schools safer. And I share a few ideas on how the United States Congress can emulate and expand upon those accomplishments.

The steps taken by the Governor Scott and enacted by the Florida legislature have little to do with the opportunistic agitation launched in the wake of the Parkland killings. They serve no political agenda — but they do serve the people's agenda because they build on common ground. They are inclusive rather than divisive.

Americans aren't interested in surrendering or curtailing their Constitutional rights. That is a simple statement of fact borne out after every similar event--time and time again. Americans are, however, deeply interested in safe schools, in caring communities, and in secure neighborhoods. As family of one of the victims, we've also learned at great personal cost, that Americans can come together, given proper leadership.

Policy and political action ought to take their cues from this American majority. We don't have to all agree on guns — and we won't. But we can agree on the most fundamental things.

We can agree that students & teachers should be safe.

We can agree that schools should be secure.

We can agree that law enforcement should be competent and must do its job.

I want to focus briefly on that last point especially. Nikolas Cruz and the deadly danger he posed were the worst-kept secrets in Parkland--with one inexcusable exception. His was a secret kept from many of the parents of the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Yet every relevant authority knew he was a deeply troubled youth with a potential for lethal violence.

The foster system knew it.

The FBI knew it.

Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel's department knew it.

Yet despite the fact that each of these agencies were fully authorized and empowered to take action well before tragedy struck, not one of them fulfilled their duty. The testament to their failure is seventeen dead children and teachers, 17 more with life altering injuries, a burden we must bear forever.

Add to this failure, the failure to warn the parents of the students. By this action or inaction, we were rendered powerless to fulfill our most sacred trust as parents, to protect our children.

Forgive me, then, if I do not believe government is the ultimate solution. Our trust in our institutions and our officeholders is deeply shaken. Our broken hearts will cry out every moment of every day for the rest of our lives...

...because the FBI bureaucracy didn't take a warning seriously;

...because a county Sheriff didn't act;

...because many of those whom we trusted to protect and serve let us down.

So, what is the solution?

The legislation just passed in Florida is a good start. There is more to be done to secure our schools. Legislation being considered in this body will continue on the efforts begun in Florida. I call on the Congress to pass this legislation. Follow the lead of what has been accomplished in Florida. Build on common ground.

But it is not the whole solution.

The problem of man against evil is as old as humanity itself, and we cannot face it alone. If we think of school violence as a disease, we would not just treat the symptoms or only don protective gear to avoid accidental exposure. We must learn to identify these troubled youth, before they turn violent and get them the help they desperately need. We can look to programs like the SafeUT program in Utah, or the work being done by the LA County Schools to identify potential threats. Even the US Secret Service has studied school shooters and defined 6 common characteristics which can aid in identification and interdiction.

This has become my mission — not one I ever wanted, but one I accept in Alaina's name — and I will see it through.

Ultimately, the solution is not in any single policy, not in any piece of legislation, and not in any activist's fervent prescription. It is in our hearts. We can try to stop the next Nikolas Cruz with better screening, with competent law enforcement, and with better security. Sometimes we will succeed, but sometimes those measures alone will fail.

Where we really stop the next killer is in our homes, in our communities, and through our faith. The best defense against the next Nikolas Cruz is in building up strong families where love can be shown to a hurting child. It is in the care we show to a struggling or overwhelmed neighbor. It is in the charity we extend to a stranger. It is in the comfort we give a wounded heart. It is in the kindness we show to an isolated, struggling young man.

It is in the reflection of God that we have in ourselves.

That isn't within the power of this Congress or any body of men to give or command. But it is within each one of us. Until we as a society understand that, our efforts will continue to fall short.

It is my hope that senseless, tragic events like the one that took my dear daughter, will awaken people across our nation that we need to work collectively to create a significant cultural shift. If we each work as individuals, within our families, communities, churches, and yes, with government to create an America that is more caring, more helping, and more loving, perhaps we can put an end to these tragedies once and for all. This time can be different!

I hope we do.

If we do it will be part of us that is most like Alaina.

Thank you.