

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

On Valentine's Day, at about 2:20pm, my 4th period English Honors class was discussing Act III of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* when the fire alarm sounded. We started to evacuate, but were quickly told it was a Code Red. A Code Red is when there is threat to safety inside the school, and everyone is supposed to shelter in place. I never imagined that there was anything truly wrong. I got my students back into my classroom, into the corner where we couldn't be seen from the small window in the door, and waited for what I assumed was a drill to end.

We had no idea that, just a couple hundred yards away, Nikolas Cruz had just fired over 100 bullets from an AR-15 assault-style rifle, killing 17 people and injuring another 17.

Our first clue that something was really wrong was a phone call one of my students received from his sister, who was in the freshman building. She told him that she had seen someone with a gun in the hallway, and had heard several shots. My student – a 6-foot-tall football player – started crying, worried for his sister's safety; I helped him calm down, reassuring him that if she could call him, it must mean that she was alright. I started to go into panic mode, but tried to keep it together for my students, knowing that *I* had to be calm or they would lose it.

Then the texts started. Parents, neighbors, even almost-strangers texted us – making sure we were okay, asking us what had happened. We told them we were safe, but we couldn't answer their other questions; we didn't know what was happening. Some of my students had left their cell phones at their desks, but I wouldn't let them go across the room to get them; what if the shooter was in the hallway, waiting to see movement in a classroom? As a parent myself, I could only imagine the fear their parents must have been feeling, not being able to get in touch with their kids; I texted their mothers from my own phone, assuring them that their children were okay, sending them pictures as proof. People from outside the school told us the rumors they were seeing on the news: there was an active shooter on our campus; at least two people were dead. As time went on, the rumors changed: police suspected that there were two or three shooters, and none had been apprehended; the death toll kept rising: 3 dead, 7 dead, 10 dead. I kept reminding my students that we couldn't believe everything we heard; no one seemed to know what was really happening. The truth was that I didn't want to believe it. I was in shock; I think we all were. We sat in the corner of my classroom until after 5 o'clock that day, trying to be as quiet as possible, trying to reassure our friends and family of our safety, trying not to panic.

After what seemed like an eternity we heard voices in the hallway outside my room – men were shouting, but we couldn't understand them. We didn't know if they were the police or the shooters. We heard them trying keys in the door – a good sign, but I wondered if whoever it was had shot someone and stolen the keys. I stood up in front of my students and faced the door, hoping these would be the good guys. Thankfully, they were.

My students and I were lucky that day. My classroom is on the opposite side of the campus from the 1200 building, and although we were terrified we were never in any immediate danger. Others, of course, were not so lucky. Not only did we lose 17 of our own, hundreds of

others were scarred from this experience. Students in my other classes, who were in the freshman building that day, have shared some of their stories with me, and the things they had to see and hear will stay with them forever. Many of them saw friends die and had to step over bodies and pools of blood to get out of their classrooms. Loud noises – even the bells between classes – make them jump; I had a girl ask me if she could stand with her back to the wall because she didn't feel safe sitting in a desk in the middle of the room, not knowing what was behind her. Dwayne Wade, the professional basketball player, came to our school for what should have been a fun treat for the kids in the midst of their grief, but many were triggered by the shouts of excitement that erupted when he stepped onto campus – they were too similar to the screams of terror they heard just a few short weeks ago. These kids will be dealing with this trauma for years to come.

And yet the MSD students have been stronger than teenagers should ever have to be. They have gone through the worst, most traumatizing experience imaginable, and instead of collapsing under the immense pressure they have focused on channeling their anger and grief into something positive. And they have succeeded! They have succeeded in getting gun control legislation passed in Florida, a state that hadn't passed similar legislation in over two decades. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Act certainly isn't perfect – the idea of putting *more* guns into schools in order to reduce gun violence seems to me like an idea that can only end in more tragedy – but the many other provisions in the bill make it a great step in the right direction. And it proves that what I tell my students is true: their actions can change the world. I got into teaching because I wanted to inspire students, but now they are inspiring me.

The issues surrounding mass shootings in this country are complex; to pretend otherwise is naïve and continues to put the general public, especially our children, in danger. People have suggested that this is a mental health issue; others have suggested that it is a school safety issue. I agree with both of these statements. We *do* need better resources for the mentally ill in our country, not just to prevent mass shootings, but to work toward a better quality of life for the thousands of people who suffer from mental illnesses. We *do* need to increase safety in our schools, to protect our children against those who would want to harm them.

But to say that the issue of mass shootings isn't also a gun issue is absurd. I cannot imagine a scenario in which Nikolas Cruz could have come to my school armed with a different type of weapon, such as a knife, and murdered 17 innocent people. Some of the victims were shot through doors, or even through walls – a knife can't do that. Even a handgun would not have been able to cause such carnage. The style of gun he used has been the weapon of choice in so many of the mass shootings in recent history: Parkland, Orlando, Las Vegas, Sandy Hook, and others. How many innocent lives could have been saved if these weapons of war weren't so readily available?

While increased funding for mental health programs and school security will no doubt have positive effects, mass shootings will not stop until we rid society of the weapons that make them possible. Please, help us protect our children by addressing all facets of this issue, and considering common sense gun laws.