News



Students at St. Thomas Aquinas High School, in Fr. Lauderdale, Florida, gather on the football field Feb. 21 as part of a solidarity walkout and prayer service for the victims of the school shooting at a week earlier at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in nearby Parkland. (St. Thomas Aquinas High School)



by Brian Roewe

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Alexa Hui was almost in tears by the sight on her school's football field.

About 1,000 students, roughly half the population at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, had gathered in silence in a circle around noon Wednesday. It was a part solidarity walkout, part prayer service for the 14 students and three school officials who were killed by a gunman a week earlier at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, less than 20 miles up the road.

The proximity of the schools, which face each other on the athletic field and occasionally partner for events, meant the latest mass shooting tragedy in America struck too close for many of the students. Hui, 18, had friends at Stoneman Douglas; thankfully, she said, none were injured. But her sister and another friend both knew a student who died.

On the field, the Aquinas students recited the names of the 17 victims, praying for each as well as those killed in past mass shootings. They said an Our Father and a Hail Mary, and offered prayers for their community to heal, for people with mental illness, for others who feel alone, and for the ability to recognize and respond to warning signs before alarms go off.

They also prayed that this time will be different.

> "As a Catholic school we have that extra responsibility almost to stand up for all life and protect all life."
> — Alexa Hui

"I really, truly believe that this is our generation and that we can control what happens. And if we care about this, and we want to turn this into something, we

can," Hui, the student body president, told her classmates at the service.

"As a Catholic school we have that extra responsibility almost to stand up for all life and protect all life," she told NCR.

The past eight days have witnessed high school students across Florida headed by survivors of the Feb. 14 Stoneman Douglas shooting — where former student Nikolas Cruz gunned down classmates and school officials with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle — not only raise the issue of gun reform once more on the national consciousness but take an active and visible lead in demanding real action, through social media, on television and in old-fashioned face-to-face interactions.

The walkout at St. Thomas Aquinas was among more than a dozen held across Florida Wednesday, with thousands of students exiting their classrooms in the nation’s latest push for gun reform. They carried posters stating "We Want to Feel Safe!" and "Stop Gun Violence" and shouted chants of "Never Again!"

Other students traveled to Tallahassee, the state capital, and to Washington, D.C., to meet with legislators — reports indicated they planned to meet with as many as 70 in the Florida Capitol alone — not just to be heard but to demand action.



Students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., cross a street in Tallahassee prior to speaking with Florida state legislators Feb. 20 at the Capitol. About 100 students from the Parkland school traveled in a three-bus caravan to demand gun restrictions. (CNS/Colin Hackley, Reuters)

"We're not here to be patted on the back. We're not here to be told we're great, that we're doing so much. Because we know what we're doing and we're doing it for a reason," Delaney Tarr, a Stoneman Douglas senior who survived the shooting, said in a speech at the Florida statehouse. "We're doing it so that our legislators, so that our lawmakers will make a change, so that they will take us seriously, so that they will not dismiss us any longer, so they won't reschedule, so they won't push us into another room as they dance around our questions.

"Because we came here prepared and we're going to come to every single meeting with every single legislator prepared. We know what we want: We want gun reform, we want common sense gun laws. We want stronger mental health checks and background checks to work in conjunction. We want a better age limit. We want

privatized selling to be completely reformed so you can't just walk into a building with $130 and walk out with an AR-15. We want change and we know how to get this change," she said.

> Florida high school senior: “We didn’t fail. The people around us failed us. And if they continue to fail us, then they will no longer be in office.” pic.twitter.com/xai0UrLo7S
>
> — NBC News (@NBCNews) February 21, 2018

At Champagnat Catholic School, in Hialeah, north of Miami, students, supported by faculty and staff, left their classrooms and marched to city hall to deliver a letter to their mayor that called for him to take a stand against gun violence and offered the school's support in making a change.

"Society has basically normalized these shootings, and it's not OK. These mass shootings are not OK at all, and we all just feel like it's time that we make a difference," senior Karleria Izaguirre, 18, said.

"We need to make a voice, make them hear us," she said.

> @PrincipalMSD #WeAreWithDouglasHigh Champagnat Catholic is Marching to City Hall in SOLIDARITY with #MSDEagles #NeverAgain #EnoughIsEnough pic.twitter.com/IRcUhqSb1U
>
> — ChampagnatLionsRock (@ChampagnatCS) February 21, 2018

The shooting had dominated the past week of conversations for students at Champagnat, a small school of 200 students, Izaguirre told NCR. There were feelings of somberness and sadness for the families who lost loved ones. There was fear of what would stop a shooting from happening in their own halls. There was also a sense of determination to not allow this latest school shooting — at least the eighth of 2018 by one count — to follow the many that went before it as a quick-dissolving moment of national mourning absent any tangible action to prevent the next mass shooting from occurring.

"It's just crazy how these things get their five minutes of fame and then it gets swept under the rug, and then it doesn't mean anything to anyone anymore," Izaguirre told NCR.

She and others see the walkout as just a first step. Plans for another protest at Champagnat next week are under way, and students hope to travel to their state capital to address their legislators in person. Already, the school has penned nearly 500 letters to their elected officials that will be mailed this week.

In a similar way, Hui at St. Thomas Aquinas hopes to organize a postcard campaign among students at her school and others in the area to send to lawmakers with the goal of "just inundating them so that they see how much of an issue this is."

"I think most people believe that we need, our country needs stricter laws on being able to purchase a gun and more safety regulations in schools," she said.



A salesman clears the chamber of an AR-15 in 2016 at a gun store in Provo, Utah. (CNS/George Frey, Reuters)

A poll of American voters released Tuesday by Quinnipiac University showed 66 percent support for stricter gun laws, a 10-year high and double those opposed.

The survey, conducted in mid-February with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points, also found two-thirds of voters supporting a nationwide ban on assault weapons, 83 percent supporting a mandatory waiting period for gun purchases, and 97 percent supporting for universal background checks.

Gun owners in the poll mirrored the support for background checks, and half of them supported stricter gun laws, compared to 44 percent in opposition.

"I just want to make them make stricter laws, make tests or do things different so it will be harder for people to get ahold of those [military-style] weapons, especially people who have mental issues," Izaguirre said.

In letters addressed Wednesday to President Donald Trump and leaders in Congress, Jesuit Fr. William Muller, executive director of the Jesuit Schools Network of North America, which represents the religious order's 79 U.S. schools and five in Canada, echoed calls made in the past by the U.S. bishops for stricter gun legislation that includes universal background checks and banning the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines.

"Columbine, Virginia Tech, Newton, Parkland — and others. They are the names of our shame as a nation," Muller said in the letter. "We cannot risk another young life because of our inaction."

Later that day, the president, along with Vice President Mike Pence and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, hosted a listening session at the White House with students, parents and teachers impacted by gun violence, including students from Stoneman Douglas, and family members of children and teens killed at Sandy Hook and Columbine.



President Donald Trump bows his head during a prayer as he sits between Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting survivors and students Julia Cordover and Carson Abt Feb. 21 at the White House. (CNS/Jonathan Ernst, Reuters)

The session, lasting more than an hour and broadcast live, saw the grieved share their stories, as well as ideas for how to address America's problem of gun violence. Trump said he would work to for stronger background checks and increased mental health services. At times, he indicated support for arming more trained teachers or professionals in schools as a deterrence, an idea he reinforced Thursday on Twitter and at another White House meeting, even floating the possibility of offering such teachers bonuses.

On Tuesday, Trump said he had directed the Justice Department to issue regulations on "bump stocks": the device that allows a semiautomatic weapon to fire rounds faster, and was used by the gunman who killed 58 people in October at an outdoor country music festival in Las Vegas.

"We're going to do something about this horrible situation that's going on. And we're going to all figure it out together," Trump said at the listening session.

At a town hall hosted by CNN that night in Sunrise, Florida, families of students at Stoneman Douglas blasted Sen. Marco Rubio for his resistance to more stringent gun laws, with one parent labeling his statements in the aftermath of another mass shooting in the state and those of president, who omitted references to guns in his initial remarks, as "pathetically weak."

A day before students arrived in Tallahassee, lawmakers in the Florida House voted against opening debate on a bill to ban assault rifles. While calling it a setback, Tarr, the Stoneham Douglas senior, vowed, "We're going to keep moving forward, because we don’t have a choice."

"We didn't fail, the people around us failed us. And if they continue to fail us, then they will no longer be in office, because soon we will be given the ability to vote and we will vote them out, and the people around us will vote us out," she said. "They must do right by us or they will lose their jobs."



Tyra Hemans, a senior from Marjory Stoneman Dougla High School in Parkland, Fla., holds a photo of her friend Joaquin Oliver as she and other students speak with Florida state legislators Feb. 20 at the Capitol in Tallahassee. (CNS/Colin Hackley, Reuters)

Students have already set in motion two additional mass demonstrations. That includes the "March for Our Lives" in D.C. on March 24, and a national high school walkout on April 20, the 19th anniversary of shooting at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado, where two students killed 13 of their classmates in what was at the time the worst high school shooting in U.S. history.

At both Champagnat and Thomas Aquinas, students are looking to attend either the national march or local versions. Other signs of support are in the works, too, such as wearing orange remembrance ribbons and organizing a day to wear Stoneman Douglas shirts with the messages "Douglas Strong" and "Never Again."

Margie Scott, assistant principal at Thomas Aquinas, told NCR that administrators met with student council members the morning of the walkout to talk about their plans but also how to sustain momentum beyond symbolic acts.

A walkout today is a statement of solidarity but the actions are the things that are going to matter most going forward," she said.

For administrators, each mass shooting becomes a time to analyze their own safety and security measures, Scott said, adding Aquinas is confident in its plan and focus on student behavior. The school has also discussed the Stoneman Douglas shooting in theology classes, with an emphasis on developing bigger hearts and more compassion for one another. An Aquinas Kindness program seeks to bring those same values to area Catholic middle schools.

Isabel Alonso, director of operations at Champagnat, called it a "big responsibility" to uphold the promise to keep students safe, and feeling safe in their schools. This past week, teachers and staff have made a concerted effort to make themselves available and present for students.

"That fear is in their walk, is in their eyes. Just a difficult look to see on a group of kids who confide in you," she told NCR.

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That feeling motivated the school administration to gather the juniors and seniors Wednesday morning to discuss what was happening elsewhere in the state and to offer their support of whatever action the students wanted to take.

"They want their voices heard, and they have the right to have their voices heard," Alonso said.

Over the weekend, the shooting hung on students’ minds, Hui said. As they hung out, gun control would ultimately come up and discussions sprouted. The momentum for the walkout emerged on social media the night before and quickly

came to fruition. That type of energy and quick action demonstrated by students across the state and country inspires the senior and her classmates, who feel determined to make this gun debate different.

"Almost everyone I've talked to believes that this could be a turning point," Hui said.

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