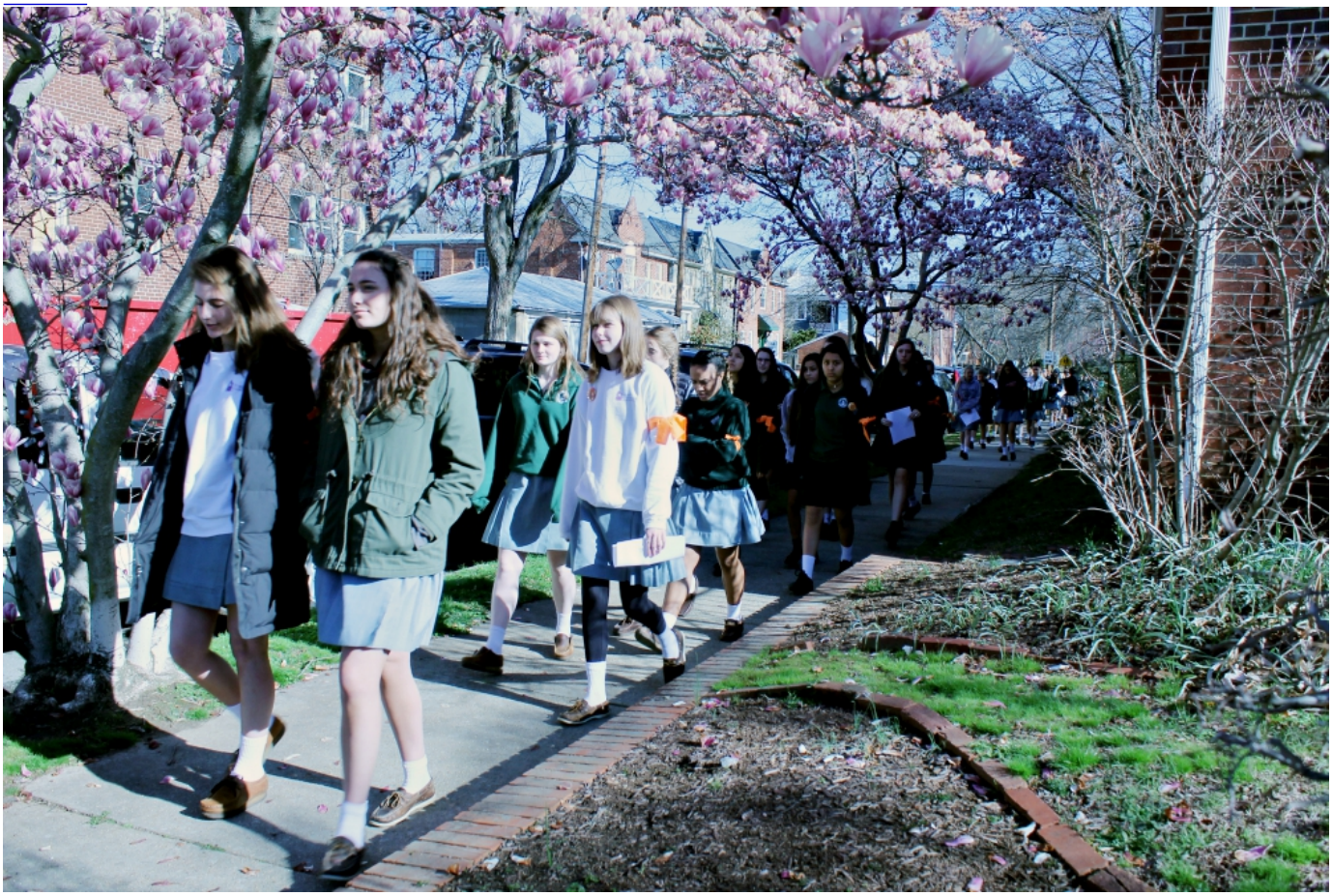
News



Roughly 150 students took part in a walkout at St. Gertrude High School in Richmond, Virginia, March 14, one of thousands of walkouts held nationwide calling for gun reform and commemorating the one-month anniversary of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. (Courtesy of St. Gertrude High School)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org

Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 14, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Updated 12:45 p.m. CDT March 14 to add interviews from St. Gertrude High School.

Updated 5:30 p.m. CDT March 14 with additional quotes from Washington, Missouri, as well as reports on Evanston, Illinois; Aurora, Colorado; and Queens, New York.

Thousands of students in the U.S. exited their classrooms Wednesday as part of a series of nationwide walkouts protesting inaction by lawmakers on gun violence in the wake of the mass shooting one month ago at a Florida high school.

The walkouts marked the anniversary of the Feb. 14 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where a 19-year-old former student armed with an AR-15 semi-automatic assault rifle killed 14 students and three school officials.

Each walkout was set to begin at 10 a.m., local time, and last 17 minutes in remembrance of the 17 people who died.

More than 3,000 walkouts across the country have been registered. The effort was organized by Women's March Youth EMPOWER, a group of young people affiliated with the Women's March organizers.

At least 30 Catholic high schools and a dozen Catholic colleges had listed walkouts on the website.

Among them were St. Joseph's Catholic Academy in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania; Sacred Heart Academy in Mount Pleasant, Michigan; Holy Names Academy in Seattle; and Maryknoll School in Honolulu.

At St. Gertrude High School in Richmond, Virginia, about 150 students along with faculty and staff met at 10 a.m. in their auditorium, where they attached orange armbands and pins as a sign of anti-gun violence. They read the names of the Stoneman Douglas victims and several students spoke why it was important for them to participate in the walkout.

"After witnessing all of the mass shootings at schools across the country I saw it as an injustice and wanted to do something to stand up against it," Katie Centofanti, a junior and one of the walkout's organizers, told NCR.

The students then walked out of the all-girls school and around the block. Back in front of the school, a chorus sang a hymn, "The Prayer for the Children," before they held a moment of silence.

Centofanti, who initially expected maybe 25 people to participate, called the walkout a success.

"We definitely wanted to open the conversation up for everyone to be aware of this issue and think about what they personally feel we should do," she said.

Cathy George, chair of St. Gertrude's theology department, said classes have talked about gun violence throughout the past month, as part of discussions about Catholic social teaching and the dignity of life. The gun issue, she added, resonates personally with her and other faculty since an alumna was shot in the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting where 27 students and five teachers were killed.

"I think we're trying to raise young women to be aware of our social climate and our political climate, and be aware of the issues of today. And the girls this morning did such an excellent job calling them to action," George said.



Msgr. Robert McClory, pastor of the National Shrine of the Little Flower Basilica in Royal Oak, Michigan, listens with the student body of Shrine Catholic High School as the names of the Parkland, Florida, shooting victims are read during a schoolwide prayer vigil March 14. (CNS/Michigan Catholic/Mike Stechschulte)

Other Catholic schools framed their actions Wednesday through their faith.

"The presence of school shootings, assault rifles, and guns do not reflect the culture of nonviolence cultivated by Jesus, and as agents of change we must not remain inactive," said the message on the walkout organizing page for Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix.

"As a Magnificat community, we are standing in solidarity with all of the people affected by gun violence, raising our hearts, thoughts, prayers, and voices," said a statement from student organizers at Magnificat High School in Rocky River, Ohio. "The purpose of this walkout is to show solidarity and compassion to victims of school shootings and their loved ones, to advocate for meaningful action towards gun reform, to encourage sincere conversation, and to promote a safe environment

at school for every student. So that the protection of the life and dignity of each person is ensured throughout our nation."

At St. Francis Borgia High School in Washington, Missouri, southeast of St. Louis, students planned to exit their classrooms and head outside to a pavilion where a student would lead those gathered in prayer and then hold a moment of silence for those who lost their lives at Stoneman Douglas.

Advertisement

Jeffery Van Deven, a junior and one of the students who helped plan Borgia's walkout, said they also planned to list some of the gun laws in their state — home to some of the laxest in the nation — and then call on seniors to register to vote and for the full student body to use template letters to send to their state representatives in Jefferson City.

Van Deven said he and two classmates, Sean Bierman and Grace McKennis, were inspired to initiate the walkout at St. Borgia by the students at Stoneman Douglas. He watched the videos that the Florida students recorded in the midst of the active shooting and other videos of the students holding their own walkouts, insisting, "Enough is enough."

"That really made an impact," he told NCR.

In the Chicago Archdiocese, nearly 200 of its schools, consisting of upward of 80,000 students, staff and teachers, planned to hold peace-building activities in solidarity with the walkouts.



Students from Notre Dame High School in Belmont, California, hold posters calling for action on gun violence. (Courtesy of Notre Dame High School)

Just before 3 p.m., the campus of Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois, was alerted to a possible person with a gun in a residence building. Police later determined it was a false report.

At Notre Dame High School in Belmont, California, students at the all-girls school were prepared to walk out and march outside the school before holding an assembly that would include a prayer service, student speeches and discussions. They would

also have tables to register students to vote.

"We have encouraged our students to become active in the political dialogue and process. ... We support and celebrate our students as they organize to make their voices heard," Maryann Osmond, head of the school, said in a statement.

Senior Luisa Margarita added, "The Catholic Church and Catholic schools are known for holding a conservative stance on some political issues. This protest reveals another side of the religion and the values we hold, that Catholics are very much about justice and equality."

At Marian High School, an all-girls Catholic school in Omaha, Nebraska, Cori Johnson hopes the walkout can help spur further conversations in her school. She said there hasn't been enough talk so far, partly because some students are afraid to say what they believe.

"We have such a platform right now, so why wouldn't we do everything in our power to help with that?" she told NCR.

She acknowledges a diverse set of opinions among her classmates on gun reform. In an effort to not make anyone feel isolated, the school added a prayer service component before the walkout, for students who might not want to join a political action but want to remember those who have died in school shootings.

"I've talked to a lot of girls who don't necessarily believe in gun reform that still want to walk out because they believe that they should feel safe at school," Johnson said.

Some steps she wants to see legislators take are raising the age to buy a firearm to 21, additional background checks, and a ban on any type of semi-automatic rifles.

Johnson, who co-leads the school's Young Politicians Club and attended this year's Women's March, joined another junior and three seniors in organizing the Marian walkout. They were surprised they had the support of their principal, who suggested the students include a prayer service.

Van Deven at St. Borgia was also surprised by the support of his school's leadership, saying the three organizers were prepared to face detention or other punishment for

the walkout.

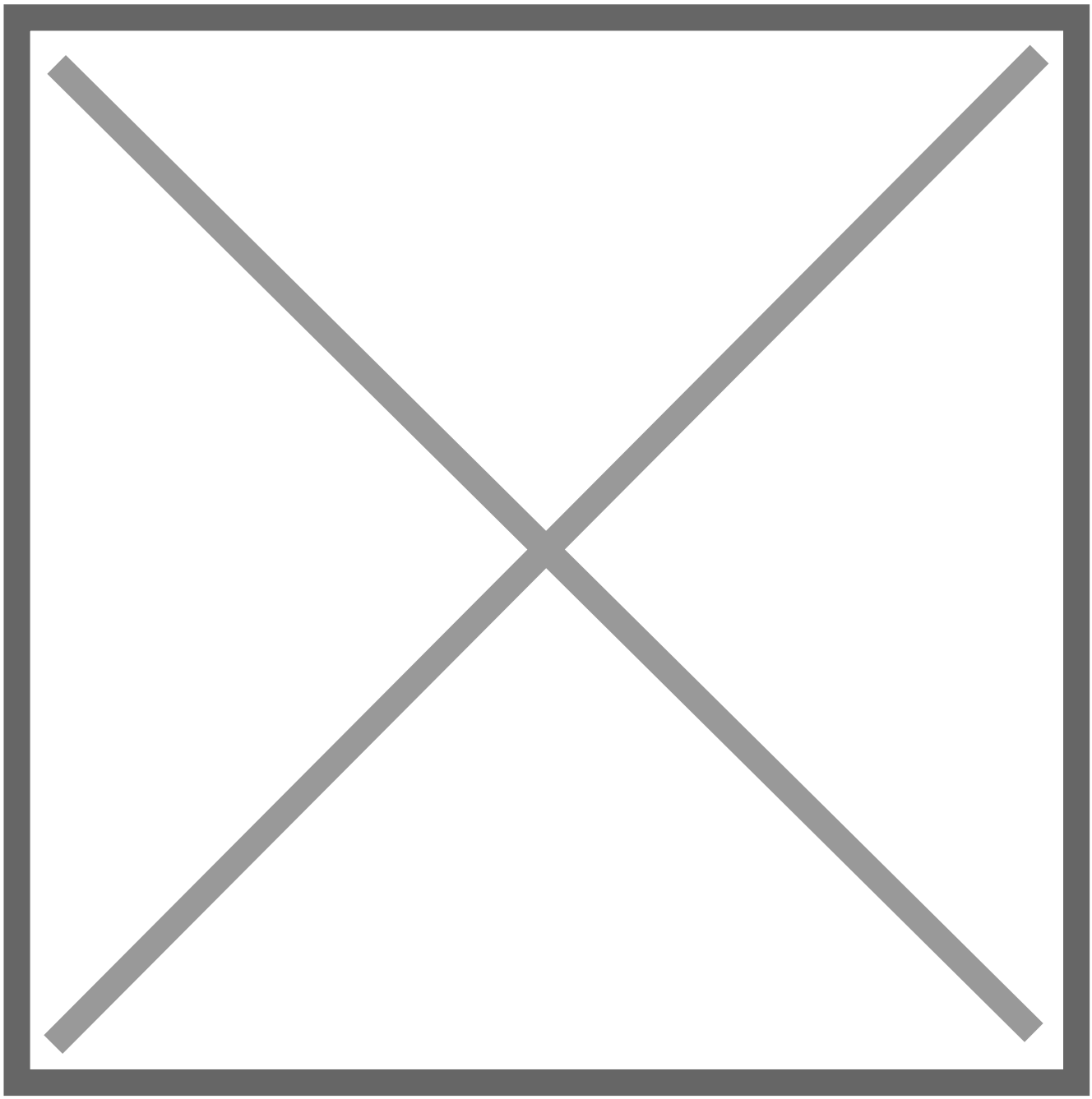
"The administration was very supportive. Our principal, Mrs. [Pam] Tholen, she said that she thought it was a wonderful idea for us to voice our opinions," he said.

In an interview the night before the walkout, Van Deven said he wasn't sure how many students would participate but he was anticipating more than 20. He recognizes the school is in a rural area where there's less openness for gun control, which some people perceive as code for banning guns altogether.

He said he would like to see a ban on assault weapons, as well as increased background checks. He also suggested a waiting period for purchasing a gun, similar to those imposed in some states for having an abortion.

The junior said it was important as a Catholic school that emphasizes the importance of human life — most often through the issues of abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty — to also address the issue of gun violence.

"We think that people shouldn't be allowed to just walk in and massacre human life. Human life is sacred and it shouldn't be taken away by someone," he said.



Students at La Reina High School, in Thousand Oaks, California, participate in a walkout March 14 in solidarity with the victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School a month earlier. (Porsia Tunzi)

Van Deven said the idea of a possible school shooting has had classmates on edge. Last week, schools in the Washington, Missouri, school district closed for a day after a suspended school employee allegedly threatened "a lot of shooting" would occur; the man was later found by police in possession of multiple rifles and 500 rounds of

ammunition.

When a recent power outage at St. Borgia left hallways dark, some students suspected the worst.

"The first thing that me and my friends thought was 'Is there a shooter coming up the stairs?' " he said.



Presentation Academy students stand arm in arm on the sidewalk in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, after walking out of class at 10 a.m. March 14 to call attention to gun violence. (CNS/ The Record/Marnie McAllister)

Past shootings in Colorado — from Columbine in 1999, to the Aurora movie theater in 2012, to Arapahoe High School in 2013 — weighed on students at Regis Jesuit High School in Aurora during their walkout that began at the end of first period, where an estimated 700 students gathered on the McNicholas Green.

The students in Justice League that organized the event were conscious of differing opinions on gun reform in the school and sought to make their walkout "more

mindful and prayerful and less political and polarized," junior Kara Toll, one of the organizers, told NCR.

"We wanted it to be something about taking action to promote dialogue and to protest the fact that our government is not making change on either side, Democrat or Republican, or however you want to look at it," she said.

Toll added it was nice to see students with vastly different opinions able to stand in solidarity for the Parkland victims. Recognizing that Stoneman Douglas students have criticized politicians and public officials for offering "thoughts and prayers" without real solutions to the problem of gun violence, the students in Justice League made it a point to state that such condolences are good but not enough.

"I definitely think that, especially at a Catholic school, thoughts and prayers are really what we focus on a lot, but in situations like these it only goes so far. So that's definitely something we tried to remind everyone of, that prayer should inspire action," Toll said.



Student Matthew McIntosh listens to a speaker during a solidarity and remembrance service at St. Francis Preparatory School in the Queens borough of New York March 14. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Concerned with the safety issues posed by a walkout among a student body of 2,500, St. Francis Preparatory School in Queens, New York, instead held two simultaneous services in its gymnasium and auditorium. In addition to prayers and student essays, school administrators emphasized the idea of a "walk up" mentality of respecting everyone and looking for ways to help others who might feel left out.

"It's walking up to that student who's sitting alone quietly in the cafeteria and walking up to them and sitting next to them and maybe creating conversation," said Patrick McLaughlin, principal at St. Francis Prep. "It's walking up to defend that person who's maybe getting bullied by other students. It's walking up to the teacher or coach and saying thank you for what you do."



Students from the sophomore class at Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School in Takoma Park, Maryland, participate in the National School Walkout on March 14. During the

walkout, students prayed 17 Hail Marys and released 17 balloons, one for each of the people killed in the Feb. 14 school shooting in Parkland, Florida. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Jaclyn Lippelmann)

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

This article was funded in part by a generous gift from Tom Bertelsen as a means to support the search for a solution to gun violence in our culture.

This story appears in the **Gun Violence** feature series. View the full series.