News



A child writes a message as people visit a makeshift memorial at Annunciation Catholic Church after theAug. 27 fatal shooting at the school on Aug. 29 in Minneapolis. (AP/Bruce Kluckhohn)

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Moments after rifle blasts reverberated inside a Minneapolis church, Catholic school children wearing plaid jumpers and green polo shirts ducked into pews, some jumping atop friends to protect them from the carnage.

One girl, Lydia Kaiser, was struck shielding her "little buddy" while her father, the school's gym teacher, helped usher children to safety and reunite them with their parents, according to a family friend organizing fundraising for the family.

A 13-year-old boy named Endre, who was shot twice and rushed into surgery, asked the doctor, "Can you say a prayer with me?" his aunt said in a GoFundMe posting. Endre's aunt said he's now recovering, and the surgeon told the family that Endre had inspired their medical team.

Despite the horror carried out Aug. 27 by a shooter whose journal entries detail weeks of preparation and a fixation on harming children, stories of bravery and tragedy have emerged as families share their accounts.

At least five children and one adult remained hospitalized Aug. 20 after the shooter fired 116 rifle rounds through the church's stained-glass windows. The attack left two students dead and 18 people wounded, nearly all of them children. The shooter died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Doctors and first responders in Minneapolis this week called the students and teachers at Annunciation Catholic School heroes for protecting each other and following their active shooter training as the barrage of gunfire erupted during the first Mass of the school year.

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Matthew Stommes, who had just walked his 12-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son into the church that morning, was sitting in a back pew when he saw flashes of gunfire and children screaming and covering their ears.

"We didn't know what was going on for those first few seconds that seemed like minutes," he said. "We could see the leaders in the church from the front starting to tell everyone to get down. But those leaders in the church here, our priest, our deacon, our principal, they were not ducking."

His own children were unscathed, but two of their friends remained hospitalized. Stommes and other parents were among those who carried injured children out of the church as emergency responders arrived.

Some of those who showed up to help didn't know their children were among the injured.



People leave flowers and keepsakes at a makeshift memorial at Annunciation Catholic Church after the Aug. 27 fatal shooting at the school on Aug. 29 in Minneapolis. (AP/Bruce Kluckhohn)

A pediatric critical care nurse at Hennepin Healthcare arrived at work Aug. 27 to help treat shooting victims. It was then that she found out her 12-year-old daughter, Sophia Forchas, was among the wounded, the family wrote on a GoFundMe page.

The girl, whose younger brother also was at the school but not wounded, underwent emergency surgery and was in critical condition, a spokesperson for the hospital confirmed Aug. 28.

"Her road ahead will be long, uncertain, and incredibly difficult — but she is strong, and she is not alone," the fundraiser says.

In the weeks before the attack, the shooter, identified as Robin Westman, 23, wrote in journals about running drills at a shooting range and borrowing money from family to buy guns. The preparation was spelled out across hundreds of pages written in Cyrillic, a centuries-old script still used in Slavic countries.

An entry in July describes the school as an "easy" target, but cautions about avoiding parents, who could have guns and fight back. The shooter also writes about waiting until school starts to be able to attack a large group of children.

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Although investigators have not found a clear motive for the attack, the shooter's connections to the school and church are clear: Westman, whose mother worked for the parish before retiring in 2021, once attended Annunciation Catholic School.

New law enforcement documents revealed Aug. 29 also show the shooter went through a romantic breakup not long before showing up at the church with a pump-action shotgun, a 9-mm pistol and a semiautomatic rifle.

What appears to be a suicide note to family contains a confession of long-held plans to carry out a shooting and talk of being deeply depressed.

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Federal officials referred to Westman as transgender, and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey decried hatred being directed at "our transgender community." Westman's

gender identity wasn't clear. In 2020, a judge approved a petition, signed by Westman's mother, asking for a name change from Robert to Robin, saying the petitioner "identifies as a female and wants her name to reflect that identification."

The shooting has renewed calls for gun safety legislation. But getting that done may be difficult in Minnesota, a state closely split along partisan lines.

This story appears in the **Minneapolis church shooting** feature series. View the full series.