News



People pray at a memorial at Annunciation Catholic Church Aug. 28 in Minneapolis. A day earlier, a shooter fired into a school Mass, killing two children and injuring more than 20 people. (AP/Abbie Parr)



by Camillo Barone

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Editor's note: *This is the first of a three-part series looking at the impact of the Aug. 27 shooting at Annunciation Parish in Minneapolis during its opening Mass for students at the parish school. This first part focuses on the harrowing moments inside the church and the heroic actions of parents trying to protect their children and the entire school community.*

The gunfire broke out just as the congregation waited to rise for the Gospel reading.

Devin O'Brien — father of three, seated at the back left side — knew what it was the instant he heard it. He jumped from the pew and ran for the left-side door, thinking only that if he could get behind the shooter and surprise him, the children might have a few more seconds.

The door wouldn't open. Later he'd learn it had been barricaded. In that split second, O'Brien understood he would probably die. His uncle, Tom Burnett Jr. of United Airlines Flight 93 — the man who helped stop terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001, and died in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, with the other 43 people on board — had lived in his mind for years, a quiet example of doing the hard thing when the moment comes.

But when O'Brien's moment arrived, it didn't feel like a charge into battle. It felt like surrender to duty.

"I heard a voice in my head, and it just said, 'be a helper.' The voice wasn't saying, 'fight.' It was something more graceful. I can't explain it," he said more than two months after the shooting, sitting on his porch in South Minneapolis on a quiet and cold late November afternoon.



Signs in the South Minneapolis neighborhood support the Annunciation Catholic Church community. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

That Wednesday in late August, O'Brien turned back toward the sanctuary, toward the children on the ground and the gunshots raining above them. If he couldn't reach the shooter, then he would guard the doors, hold the line and buy every second he could. He believed he was going to die doing it. But he stepped forward anyway.

"During those seconds, I had resigned myself entirely to my fate. It was the only option I had," O'Brien said.

This story follows six Annunciation parents who lived through the Aug. 27 shooting inside their own church, seated beside or searching for their children as violence tore through a place meant for peace and prayer. Two and a half months after the event, they spoke to the National Catholic Reporter about what they saw, what they feared and how they are now trying to stitch their lives back together.

The path forward for these Annunciation parents has not been easy.

Yet each of them, in different ways, has leaned on faith, ritual and the steady net of their parish community to survive the trauma. In their voices, a common thread emerges: In the darkest minutes and in the long days after, prayer, fellowship and the simple presence of one another has kept them standing.

For these parents, Annunciation isn't just a parish and a school. It is the center of their family life long before the morning everything changed.

Tara Keegan, a mother of five, arrived more than 15 years ago looking for exactly what Annunciation turned out to be: a faith community full of young families, people she could sit beside in church on Sunday and see again at school drop-off on Monday. Within a year, she said sitting in the living room of her new house in South Minneapolis, both the school and the parish felt like a second home.

"Our best friends are at Annunciation and they will be our lifelong friends," she said. "We found what we were looking for there."

Keegan eventually stepped into ministry, helping relaunch the children's Liturgy of the Word with another mom, a role that fit naturally with her work as a school counselor.

As this school year approached, Keegan's house was buzzing with the usual late-August chaos: new uniforms, new backpacks and, for the first time, all her children were finally in full-day school. She said she was excited to have a few quiet hours to herself after years of nonstop parenting.

For Shea McAdaragh*, O'Brien's brother-in-law and neighbor, Annunciation had always been defined by its simplicity: "I would use one word: community.

Annunciation is a community parish and a community school."

What made it special, he said, are the people — the families who showed up, who volunteered, who jumped in wherever needed. The kind of place where bonds formed without effort and where a century-old building managed to feel lived-in and loved.



The side door of Annunciation Catholic Church is covered with messages commemorating the victims. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Sean O'Brien felt that same late-August lift. After a long summer at home with four young kids, the return to school meant structure, calm and a small breath of relief for parents who'd spent months balancing joy and exhaustion. But beyond logistics, Annunciation carried its own reassurance, he said.

"When you show up at Annunciation and get to walk your kids in that door, there's a feeling like I'm doing exactly what I should be doing as a parent. I'm giving my kids the best here," he said, his eyes shining in his living room, shortly after his four

children came down from their bedrooms to wish him goodnight. In their rooms, they had created small altars in memory of the two Annunciation students who died in the shooting: 8-year-old Fletcher Merkel and 10-year-old Harper Moyski.

For Brian Cleary, whose 5-year old son was starting school for the first time, those days were emotional. This was the moment their first child moved on from daycare and into kindergarten at Annunciation. On Monday, Aug. 25, they were allowed to walk him inside. Tuesday, Aug. 26, he took those first steps alone.

"I vividly remember looking back on that Tuesday when we couldn’t walk him into the school for the first time, and watching him with his backpack walk into the foyer of the school by himself under the Annunciation sign and then the next day, everything changed."

That sense of safety and familiarity is what made the morning of August 27 so unthinkable.

Mary Perez embraces her son, Felix, a first-grade student at Annunciation Catholic School in M

Mary Perez embraces her son, Felix, a first-grade student at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis, during an interfaith prayer service at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis Aug. 28. The previous day, a shooter opened fire through the windows of the church, killing two children and wounding 30 people. (OSV News/Reuters/Tim Evans)

When the first shots broke into the Mass about 8:25 a.m., the sanctuary was full of children — first through eighth graders — plus teachers and a small cluster of parents. On the back left side of the church, in the row beside the stained-glass windows that the shooter targeted first from outside, Devin O'Brien, McAdaragh, Sean O'Brien, and Matt Stommes, another Annunciation father of four, were sitting together. Keegan and Cleary sat on the far back right, away from the windows.

What McAdaragh remembers with total clarity is that the instant he heard shots, he understood what it was. A school shooting. He dove behind the baptismal font, thinking stone would provide better protection than the wooden pew.

Sean O'Brien, a few feet away, had heard the glass shatter before he registered the noise as gunfire. He grabbed his 10-month old daughter Molly "like a football," tucked her under his arm, and lunged for a stone pillar. But as the shooting shifted

along the left wall, he realized even that wasn't safe. He crawled across the sanctuary toward the right side, carrying his daughter as the church fell into a deafening silence interrupted by repeated gunshots.

Stommes, sitting closest to the windows among the four fathers, felt the shots before he processed them. He saw Devin O'Brien and McAdaragh launch from the pews, giving him space to move. He dropped, crawled out and began scanning for doors, teachers, anyone who might need help.

"The thought of my children crossed my mind. A thought of my wife crossed my mind," he recalled. He ended up at the exterior door on the east side, holding it shut with his body, trying to barricade it, thinking the shooter might head in that direction



Annunciation Catholic Church in South Minneapolis Nov. 12 (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Across the aisle on the far right, Keegan had only seconds to react. Her children weren't sitting near her, and in the chaos, she lost sight of them. Cleary, also on the right side, dove down with the other parents and children as bullets crossed the sanctuary. When the attack ended, he said he focused on the search for his son, convinced he would find him wounded or worse, while also assisting the other adults in triaging the children outside the church.

He only learned a few minutes later — and considered it a miracle — that the kindergartners had not joined the Mass in a last-minute decision around 8 a.m.

Back on the left side, Devin O'Brien reacted even faster than the others. He remembers finishing the responsorial psalm, his mind still fumbling to recall the refrain, when the shots erupted just feet from where he sat. He recognized the sound instantly.

He sprinted up the left aisle toward a side door — his instinct was to get behind the gunman, outside, and try to stop him. The door didn't open.

In that moment, everything in him shifted. If he couldn't go out, the only option left was to prevent the shooter from coming in.

He turned back into the sanctuary and yelled to McAdaragh and Stommes: "Guard the front doors!"

A memorial sign recalls Fletcher Merkel, 8, who died during the shooting at Annunciation Chu

A memorial sign recalls Fletcher Merkel, 8, who died during the shooting at Annunciation Church in Minneapolis Aug. 27. Harper Moyski, 10, was also killed in the shooting. (OSV News/The Catholic Spirit/David Hrbacek)

McAdaragh, his brother-in-law, heard him from behind the baptismal font. He got up and moved to the wide, glass-paneled entrance with Stommes. "Devin is an unadulterated, unquestionable hero," he said later. "However we wanted to find that term, he was willing to sacrifice his life for these children."

McAdaragh himself had already reached a grim clarity. "I was not ready to die," he said, crying in an empty cafe by Annunciation during his early morning interview.

"I was not ready to die. I did not want to die, but I was going to do it."

His plan — if the shooter came to the main entrance — was not to stop him, but to buy seconds. Just seconds. Enough time for the children behind him to escape.

Bullets kept streaking through the windows. McAdaragh felt them pass by his head. He saw splinters burst from the pews and heard wood being chewed apart. He said he was sure the sanctuary would be full of dead children.

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Sean O'Brien, having crawled all the way to the far right aisle, heard the shots move deeper along the left wall. When the firing softened — still loud, but not directly into the sanctuary — he rose cautiously. A teacher shouted for help, and he carried the first wounded girl he saw out of the pews.

"I held her hand and told her, 'Help is coming, keep breathing, you're doing great,' " he said. Molly, his daughter, clung to his back crying as he pressed a towel to the girl's head. Her small backpack had three bullet holes through it; they left it in the pew where they originally sat.

At some point — no one can agree exactly when — the first officer came in: Sgt. Ryan Kelly, who showed up by the front door of the church. Hearing that the shooter was outside, Kelly immediately sprinted back out. McAdaragh, who was guarding that same door, saw this and thought, "I'm not going to die today."

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Inside, the parents continued to triage as best they could. Devin O'Brien started moving from pew to pew, asking, "Is anyone hurt?" He gathered the wounded near the center of the church, where they would be somewhat shielded if shots returned. He heard the final rounds.

Then the shooting moved away, down the exterior back stairs. The sanctuary went silent except for the crying of children. It had been just over two minutes since the first shot. After the sanctuary finally emptied, teachers guided the uninjured

students into the school gym, where staff tried to create calm amid the chaos.

One by one, parents made their way there, too, moving quickly but shakily, scanning the crowd until they found their children.

***Up next**: The second part of this series, looking at healing and hope after the tragedy and a Q and A with Annunciation's pastor, Fr. Dennis Zehren, will be published on NCR Dec. 5.*

*This article has been updated to correct the spelling of one parent's name.

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