

COURSE OF ACTION

Students at Metropolitan Learning Center, a Portland alternative high school, interviewed each other on the issue of gun violence in schools

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On Feb. 14, my worst nightmare became a reality for an American school teacher in Parkland, Fla. Students and educators at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School heard gun shots and came to a terrifying realization: This was not another drill. There was a person with a weapon of war loose in a school. Well-rehearsed protocols were set into motion – doors were closed and locked, voices were hushed, and teachers coped with the impossible task of calming and protecting their students from the unspeakable violence that had walked right through the front door.

With gun violence back in the headlines, educators are once again confronted with the emotional challenge of comforting concerned students and their families, advocating for school safety and facilitating political activism among their student bodies. Tension is high; The Oregonian reported an uptick in shooting threats in schools as we once again attempt to deal with the aftermath of this uniquely American problem.

As a high school English teacher who is fairly new to the classroom, I was shaken by Parkland deeply and differently than other

mass shootings. I've come to understand that this issue resonates intensely with America's teachers who are on the front lines of this seemingly endless battle to protect students from the grim reality of school shooters.

The trauma rests heavily on veteran educator Kim Wilson, who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade math at Scott Elementary School. She has been with Portland Public Schools for almost 14 years, where she has worked to help students cope with the everyday reality of gun violence.

To her, the issue is larger than the moment. "I've had students who have lost parents and relatives to gun violence," Wilson said. "That's the biggest thing that people aren't talking about – the trauma that students and families have experienced around this issue. Not necessarily fear of a school shooter, but the gun violence that exists in their homes, around their families, in their communities."

In Oregon, an average of 456 people die each year from firearm injuries, according to the Oregon

Health Authority. Firearm homicide occurs most often in the context of intimate partner violence and gang violence.

"There's so much more that needs to be talked about around gun violence than mass shootings," Wilson said. "I think it speaks to most of America being out of touch with poor people, with people of color. Poverty and gun violence go hand in hand; drugs, violence, sexual assault, trauma – they all take advantage of a vulnerable population."

Still, she can't help but be heartened by the student activism she sees around her, both at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland and in her own classroom.

"They will inspire," she said of the Parkland students. "Any time we can talk about important subjects, race, poverty, etc., we need to be willing to listen, even if it's uncomfortable. Like the women's march, it's empowering for young people. The minute you give value into what someone else is saying, things start happening."

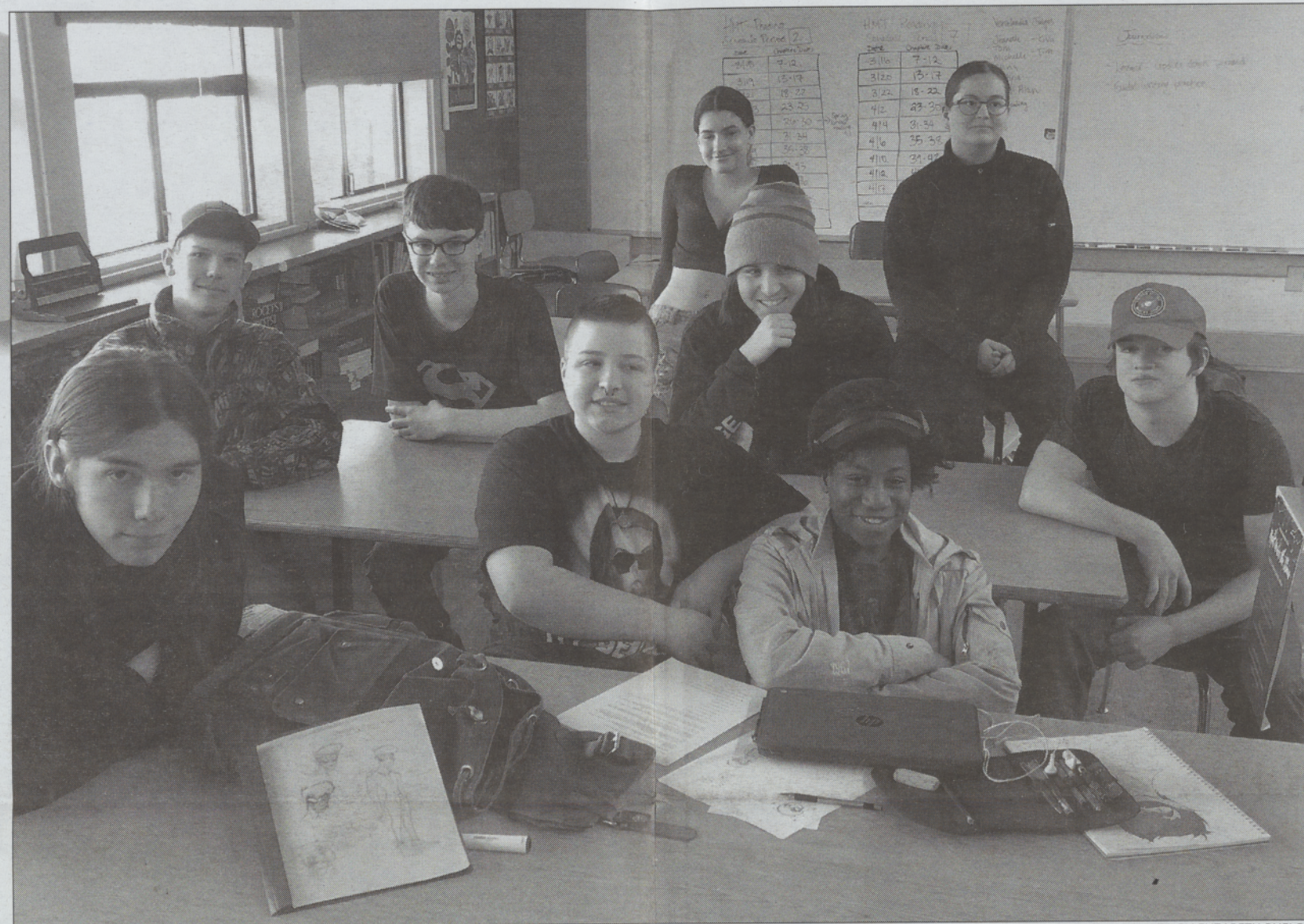
The energy around the issue seems different than in times past. Students in my classroom are interested in the topic; they are following the news aftermath of Parkland, and most participated in the student walkout on March 14.

In the wake of this latest school shooting, as students across the country were organizing around gun issues, I asked my journalism class students to write about why they were – or were not – participating in the walkouts and had them interview each other on the issue of guns. It is the students' voices that give me hope. Here are excerpts from some of their writings.

WHY I MARCH

Today I march for the lives that have been lost and the families of the victims. I am not only marching for the lives lost but I'm protesting the U.S government for not doing much to help and prevent these types of incidents. I will participate in all walkouts related to this topic and all topics that can make a change not only in this country but in the world. The fact that most countries look at the U.S. and all they see is violence saddens me because I moved here hoping for a better lifestyle and environment, but it seems to be a lie we all live in.

Nubia Ramirez
10th grade



Students at Metropolitan Learning Center: front row from left, Hunter Jones, Alex Tonkin and D'Archer Bartlett; middle row, Blake Leikem, Adrian Robinson, Matisse Light and Noah Reynolds; and back row, Silver Ramirez, Judith Solomon

Judith Solomon Interviewing Matisse Light 10th grade

After the recent massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., that left 17 people dead, young people are taking the lead, showing their solidarity by participating in walkouts. One such student is Matisse Light, a 16-year-old sophomore at the Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland.

"It is important for the youthful proletariat to have their message heard," Light said.

While the violence in Florida and the activism of the survivors has awakened many to the issue of gun violence, Matisse has had a strong opinion on this issue since he became politically active. He feels that there needs to be an end to gun violence, but the working class should be armed and that "absolute disarmament is equivalent to putting a Band-Aid on the rotting corpse that is American violence," referring to American military and police violence.

Matisse acknowledged that while young people currently and historically have been at the forefront of social and political movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Palestinian Liberation, DACA and Standing Rock, the mainstream media has put more focus on the Parkland activists because they are more "easily marketable by the mass media" because they fit into the "American hegemony."

The Parkland massacre has made many think about the role lobbying groups such as the National Rifle Association have in the lawmaking process. Matisse believes that lobbying groups should have no role in American politics, and the "existence of lobbying is proof that democracy is a very hollow thing in America."

WHY I MARCH

I am walking out in the support of all the victims of school shootings, and in support of all students in general. I'm also interested in what people have to say in the sharing section of the walkout. Because students have a voice today and it needs to be heard by everyone possible.

Sam Bartels
10th grade

Adrian Robinson Interviewing Judith Solomon 11th grade

"I was upset," says Judith Solomon, a Metropolitan Learning Center sophomore, talking about the Feb. 14 Parkland, Fla., school shooting. "But I wasn't surprised because it's happened so many times and it's such a common occurrence."

It's unfortunately true. America has witnessed 12 school shootings so far this year. Solomon also said it made her a little bit scared when she goes to school. She also found it odd how a 19-year-old could buy a gun, and her 20-year-old brother couldn't buy beer.

During the interview, she was asked if President Trump and the NRA were to blame for the recent school shooting. "If you look at how much money the NRA spends on local elections, it's pretty wacky."

"The NRA," she continued, "likes it when a gun control law doesn't get passed, but when there's a school shooting, they just send their thoughts and prayers."

Judith was correct. The NRA did send their thoughts and prayers. However, the NRA also funds Republican figures for supporting anti gun-control policies.

As a response to the situation, Solomon is against having more guns in schools. And she plans to be a part of the upcoming nationwide student walkout on April 20th.

"I think it's really important to be in solidarity with other students and other activists to show people that I'm not OK with the NRA thinking that their money is more important than my life."

Zin Leier Interviewing Alex Tonkin 11th grade

Alex Tonkin, a 16-year-old sophomore at Metropolitan Learning Center high school, has some valid concerns about arming teachers to combat violence in schools.

"I mean this in the nicest way: I mean, some of them would do stupid things (with the gun). Like, I had one teacher who had coffee and paint on opposite sides of the room, and nearly drank the paint thinking it was the coffee."

He brings up a fair point – accidental gun deaths in the United States have taken around 3,500 lives from 2005 to 2010 – many of the victims under 21. It's not uncommon you'll come across a story of a child accidentally shooting somebody, or itself. What would happen if a teacher accidentally leaves the safety triggers off, and a child who's curious pulls the trigger if the gun is unattended? What if, instead of it being paint and coffee, a teacher nearly shot what he thought had no bullets in it?

Alex was also asked about how he felt about the blame that's pinned on mental illness when these shootings occur.

"Trump took away the *one* gun law they had, which was the law which made it difficult for mentally ill people to get guns. Even then ... mental illness isn't why people shoot other people."

Alex is correct. Almost exactly a year before the deadly shooting in Parkland, Donald Trump signed a bill removing the law that prevented some severely mentally ill people from obtaining guns.

"When white people shoot up a school, it's blamed on mental illness. When a black or Latinx person shoots up a school, it's blamed on their race and racist ideas."

The vast majority of perpetrators of mass shootings are white – from 1982 to now, there have been 56 recorded white mass shooters, which is more than all the other recorded races combined.

And it's heard again and again, that white shooters were "bullied," "misunderstood," or played "violent" video games; often completely glossing over how many white mass shooters have ties to racist organizations.

When asked about the ideal solution, no matter how unrealistic, Alex: ban guns. "Just ban guns. People say, 'oh, they'll just buy them on the black market,' but some young people can't even get stable jobs, I'd doubt they'd go there."

The black market counter-argument Alex brought up is a common one used by those who want to keep gun laws the way they are despite actual evidence proving it to be false. After a tragic mass shooting in 1997, Australia instituted a gun buy-back program. As a result, gun violence didn't increase at all: It dropped substantially, and there's been no mass shootings in Australia since the ban, while the United States has had 35 from the span of 1999 to 2012.

Alex expressed feeling afraid of coming to school on certain days, and said he would be participating in school walkouts on March 24 and April 20.

Thoughts and prayers aren't enough, because in America, there are students who don't feel safe in a place they're supposed to.

Politicians have downplayed the issue, but the students are speaking up to let their mind be heard.

Matisse Light Interviewing Noah Reynolds 10th grade

Gun violence is a major issue in America, and the only method of finding out how to end it and control it is having conversations with people all across the political board. Just weeks after the devastating Parkland shooting, this interview was urgent, tense and ultimately very important.

I asked Noah Reynolds, 10th grade, about what he thought caused the shootings that are oh-so-prevalent in America. His response was quick.

"I think it's the result of being raised in an unsafe environment, being shown too much violence in TV, video games," he said. "It becomes a sport to them. Responsibility is like, for kids in conservative households with more guns, when it's OK to use one, what it's for, how to survive in a poor neighborhood. Parents are very responsible for this."

The conversation shifted to what the law's responsibilities should be.

"I think that there should be stricter laws around buying a gun, and you should be able to buy one if you're shown to be responsible with it, no mental illness or anger issues. I think the age limit should be 21, like it is for alcohol/weed. Background check should be no criminal record, mental illness, anger issues or violations allowed."

So, only for the most clean-cut of Americans, then. The conversation continued to focus on America, the land of the free and yet also the place where such occurrences happen nearly every month. "I think that people can be raised with guns and be responsible. America isn't to blame, it's the lack of education."

#NEVERAGAIN

The student activist movement #NeverAgain is organizing the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C., on March 24, and another school walkout April 20, the 19th anniversary of the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.

WHY I MARCH

The goal of the student walkout is not to get so mad that everybody just decides to ban assault weapons. The goal is to demonstrate that students can no longer tolerate being put at risk by the lack of restrictions around guns. It's true that MLC is at relatively low risk of gun violence, however, solidarity is deeply important. It would be against my personal ethics not to stand against gun violence just because I am safer from it than most."

Hunter Jones
12th grade