



STUDENTS FROM CHURCHILL HIGH SCHOOL AND THE ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY MIDDLE SCHOOL MARCH ON MARCH 14

PHOTO BY MEERAH POWELL

STUDENTS WALK WHILE GROWNUPS TALK

The gun violence conversation roils while students try to make their voices heard

Hundreds of students across Lane County — and thousands around the country — rallied the morning of March 14 with the hope of forcing adults' hands when it comes to gun control. The message was brief but powerful: Students want change and they want to make it happen.

Wednesday's rallies were appetizers for another nationwide demonstration later this month. On March 24, "March for Our Lives" rallies will follow up on the momentum created last week. More than 730 marches are scheduled around the country.

Schools nationwide had the same message on March 14. Gun violence is ripping through the U.S., and students are worried they might be the next victims.

As students flooded onto the sidewalk directly in front of South Eugene High School, gathering around the flagpole, adults and other non-students were told to stay on the sidewalk across the parking lot. Only students and staff were allowed on school property during the rally.

Building on the momentum of successful Women's Marches, the organizers called for the March 14 walkout. An expected crowd of 1,500-2,000 people will rally March 24 at the Wayne Morse Federal Courthouse to hear speakers before marching to 18th Avenue and Charnelton Street.

A group of nine high schoolers representing schools in Lane County organized Eugene's event. Maya Corral, a senior at South and co-organizer of both rallies, says she wants, first and foremost, to support the Parkland students.

Corral says didn't think she would be in this situation when she started at South. The "begrudging" activist didn't think this would still be a problem in 2018.

Since 2013 there have been more than 300 incidents of gun violence on or around school campuses, according to EverytownResearch.org. Three of those have happened in Oregon, the bloodiest being in 2015 when a shooter killed nine students at Umpqua Community College.

A suicide at Bend High School and murder-suicide in Troutdale bring the death toll up to 12 in that time.

The danger was close to home in 1998, when a student at Thurston High School killed two students and injured 25 others after shooting his parents the day before. At the time, such violence seemed unthinkable, but that was before Columbine in Colorado, where 15 people, including the shooters, died in 1999.

The list since then has been endless.

"The reason I'm angry about this issue is I've been a student for the last decade and there hasn't been change," Corral says. "I feel like I'm directly affected by this issue, and my representatives aren't doing anything about it."

Students have found their voices since the Parkland massacre. Adults are taking notice of the newfound platform, too.

"I think those students speak a truth that adults sometimes are unable or unwilling to speak," Christy Monson, a member of Moms Demand Action, said at the South rally. "Demonstrating is exactly what they should be doing. And I expect we'll hear a lot more from them in the future. We have a lot to learn from them."

Moms Demand Action is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization started in 2012 following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that killed 20 young students and

six adults. The group advocates for sensible gun control, flexing its arms in all 50 states.

Since 2012, Oregon members of MDA have worked to shape local and national gun safety legislation. Andrea Platt, a volunteer communications leader, says she has sat down with both state and federal legislators to talk about how important gun safety is for Oregonians.

Platt joined MDA nearly two years ago when her children were put in danger by a man who discharged a gun in the Capitol visitors' center in Washington, D.C.

"It really drove home that there is no safety when guns are in dangerous hands," Platt says. "I thought, 'I have to do something.'"

Platt and MDA have been slowly making headway. Supporting House Bill 4145 earlier this year helped close loopholes allowing convicted stalkers and domestic abusers to purchase or own weapons in Oregon.

In 2015 MDA supported Senate Bill 941, ensuring all private gun sales in Oregon — including online and gun show sales — required the same background checks as retail purchases.

When students take to the streets again Saturday, groups like MDA will be throwing their support behind them in hopes the momentum will lead to broad changes in the state's and nation's gun laws.

"When volunteers want to step up and support students doing this important work, we want to do that," Platt says of MDA's relationship to the protest. "But this is really a student-led effort. We aren't going to tell them what they want. They are pretty clear on it."

Despite their best efforts, adults have failed to achieve any lasting measures. Now they hope students can do something more.

"All of us are looking to make change," Platt says. "We've got to do something different. They are absolutely essential to accomplishing our goals." ■

The March for Our Lives will begin 11 am Saturday, March 24, in front of the Wayne L. Morse U.S. Courthouse, 405 E. 8th Ave. Student organizers will be wearing matching orange sweatshirts. Signs are encouraged. Visit the event Facebook page for more info: facebook.com/March4ourliveseugene.