



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on August 2, 2016

Tower Shooting Memorial Coincides With Texas Campus Carry Law

Nobody can get his head around a mass shooting, especially the original one. Long before Columbine or Virginia Tech, there was the University of Texas, where on the morning of August 1, 1966 in Austin, Texas, sniper Charles Whitman opened fire from the Main Building on the UT campus. After 90 minutes, 13 people on campus were dead, more than 30 others wounded. (Photo of a wounded and a hiding student shown) It would later be discovered that Whitman had already killed his mother and wife before climbing to the observation deck of the building. His death at the hands of Austin police brought the day's tally to 16.



The architectural icon known as The Tower was the scene of a memorial on Monday morning, the 50th anniversary of the nation's first mass school shooting, to remember the survivors, mourn the victims, and honor the law-enforcement officers who were, well, heroes on that day. An estimated 400 people gathered in a garden at the Tower's base to dedicate a marker to the victims, and to remember. Ironically, the day marked another milestone — it's the day that Texas students will first be permitted to carry concealed weapons into campus buildings.

For weeks preceding Monday's event, local radio and news outlets heralded the irony of the concurrence of the two events, and to reflect on the seeming inadequacies of dealing with a mass shooting in the society of the '60s.

The university has been chided over the years for not offering more in the way of helping people deal with their grief. But perhaps that's only in retrospect. No one was, or could have been prepared. Law enforcement hadn't been prepared, society hadn't been prepared, and UT hadn't been prepared, and healing hadn't taken place. At least according to media.

For many, healing wouldn't be easy. As it hasn't been for any victims of any of history's tragedies. But in spite of a lack of readiness, folks in Austin, like folks everywhere, figured it out. Fifty years ago, a local funeral home helped transport victims to hospitals, people on campus rushed to the aid of victims, and a civilian aided police in gaining access to the Tower to end Whitman's actions.

Whitman's first target was a young pregnant woman walking across campus. The bullet ended the life of Claire Wilson's baby, but Wilson survived and spoke at Monday's brief ceremony, thanking those who helped organize the event, and those still living who had helped on that day. And she offered special thanks to the man who had rushed into the open to carry her to safety.

She was joined by UT President Gregory Fenves, and Congressman Lloyd Doggett (who'd been on campus that day). Fenves said, "The new memorial is long, long overdue."



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Congressman Doggett recalled that the campus' Main Building came to be known as "The Tower of Tragedy," and, that terms such as SWAT team, first responder, and gun violence were not part of our lexicon prior to that day. In fact, SWAT teams came about as a direct result of the shooting. But unspoken at the memorial ceremony were concerns about the presence of firearms at the site of such a massacre.

One would have expected a contingent of anti- or pro-gun activists to disrupt the event. Or maybe a lot of tension surrounding the expansion of concealed carry. But given the ceremony underway, even at liberal UT (the nation's largest university) civility prevailed, and the mood was respectful and reverent.

But the media message has been relentless surrounding these two events. According to KUT, the Austin NPR affiliate, [Texas students overwhelmingly oppose the idea of carrying on campus](#), and pundits point to the Tower shooting as evidence of what can happen when a gun is around. Presumably, more gun control laws are needed to prevent such killings. But Whitman left evidence of deliberately planning this shooting, perhaps years in advance, and it remains unclear how he would have been deterred by more restrictive laws.

Those on the other side of the argument point to the Tower shooting as a reason for campus carry. Civilians were [reportedly credited](#) by officer [Ramiro Martinez](#), the man who killed Whitman, for decreasing the number of victims by bringing their own weapons to the scene and firing at Whitman and forcing him to take cover.

It should be noted that under the new law, restrictions do apply — the weapon must be concealed, and is prohibited in certain circumstances, such as in laboratories. And the carrier must be licensed to carry, the minimum age for which in Texas is 21.

In addition, the faculty and staff will be given the option of banning guns from their private offices, but that's not enough for one professor. The dean of the Architecture School has announced he'll be leaving, with the campus carry issue having played a large part in his decision. The issue has been quite a contentious one at UT — not so much at other Lone Star campuses.

After the remembrance ceremony, UT President Fennessey was interviewed about the new law, and said UT officials were worried about student enrollment and faculty retention because of the law change. He said they would be monitoring whether the number of student applications would be affected by the permissibility of concealed weapons in a classroom or building, and whether or not faculty would be deterred from joining the UT stable.

State Representative Elliott Naishtat claims the presence of handguns on campus will stifle freedom of speech. But it could be argued that the constant fear of committing a "micro-aggression," or the requirements of "safe places," or the creation of "free speech zones" have already done the stifling.

But in a quirky turn of events, one professor from the University of Houston, who opposes the new gun law, is considering a different take. Maria Gonzalez is considering getting her own license to carry. She said, "There's a part of me that instinctively says if you're concealed carrying, so am I." Gonzalez says she teaches controversial topics, such as "feminist theory and queer theory. Because we have had incidents where we have had to call security on a student, where, in fact, students have yelled and screamed."

Proponents say that is the whole point of the law: If you don't know who might be carrying, you might alter your behavior for the better.



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It's unlikely the debate will be settled soon, given current feeling in the Lone Star State's most liberal city, and the topic is a highly controversial one on the UT campus. But for now, the memorial ceremony passed without incident, even without a speaker calling for more gun control. Perhaps in deference to the victims and survivors, they refrained from turning the event into an explosive argument over something altogether different. Either way, perhaps the presence of weapons on Texas campuses will help prevent or mitigate another shooting like the one that day in 1966. Campus carry appears here to stay.



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