



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 18, 2012

## Stories of Heroism and Bravery Emerge From Sandy Hook Tragedy

When unspeakable tragedy unfolds like that of last Friday's school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, there are very few words that can alleviate the emotional trauma that pervades the nation in the wake of the horror. However, even in the midst of something so tragic as Friday's events, stories emerge of heroism and courage and miracles that provide some source of comfort in an otherwise dark and dreadful place.



When gunman Adam Lanza broke through the school door, school psychologist Mary Sherlach and principal Dawn Hochsprung put themselves in harm's way to [protect](#) the rest of the school, and perished in the process.

District Superintendent Janet Robinson said that Hochsprung died while lunging at the gunman. Sherlach, who accompanied Hochsprung to investigate the source of the gunfire, was also killed.

School therapist Diane Day, who was sitting in a meeting with Hochsprung and Sherlach when the gunman invaded the building, said of the two women, "They didn't think twice about confronting or seeing what was going on."

One of the administrators turned on the intercom to alert teachers and staff to the events that were unfolding in the front office, an act that likely saved many lives as it gave teachers a moment to get their students to safety. Carrie Usher, a fourth-grade teacher at the school, believes it was the principal who turned on the intercom.

Usher's class, after hearing the events transpire over the intercom, hid in the closet, and luckily escaped unharmed.

"The gunfire was just unbelievable. It felt like it lasted for five minutes," the teacher said. "It wouldn't stop."

Meanwhile, another teacher at the meeting with the principal noticed that there was no lock to secure the door to the meeting room, and used her body against the door to hold it shut. That teacher was shot through the door in the arm and leg.

Once teachers were alerted to the drama unfolding, students who were in the hallway were grabbed by teachers and brought out of the way of gunfire and into their classrooms. One eight-year-old student [told](#) WCBS-TV that he was on his way to the school's office when a teacher helped get him to safety: "I saw some of the bullets going down the hall that I was right next to and then a teacher pulled me into her classroom," the student said.

Brave 27-year-old teacher [Victoria Soto](#) placed herself in the direct line of fire to protect her students.

While the exact details of Victoria's encounter with the gunman are a bit murky, the one item that remains unchanged is that she put the lives of her students before her own. Initial stories circulating on



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the Internet indicated that Soto was able to hide her students in closets and cabinets in her room before she was confronted by the gunman. The stories claimed that Victoria told the gunman that her students were in the gym before she was killed and that her students escaped unscathed.

According to one of Soto's students, Aidan, however, those details are not entirely accurate. Aidan explains that when the students first heard the gunshots, which sounded like "falling hammers," Soto moved her first-grade students to the other side of the room, following school lockdown procedures. Moments later, the gunman appeared in Soto's doorway. Victoria then positioned herself in front of the students, and the gunman shot her. Five other students were killed as well, but the rest of Soto's class managed to run out of the room, past the gunman and escape to safety.

Aidan's father explains, "They ran past the guy. He was standing in the doorway, and they just ran right past him."

Aidan and his classmates ran out of the building toward the main road, where they were picked up by a woman who drove them to the police station.

Another teacher, Kaitlin Roig, was able to save her students and herself from the unfathomable evil that invaded the building on that fateful day.

When the shooting began, Roig immediately closed her door and hurried her students into their class bathroom. She piled them into the bathroom, and barricaded the door with a wheeled storage unit so as to give the bathroom the appearance of being a storage space.

"We all got in there. I locked us in," explained Roig. "I don't know if [the gunman] came in the room.... I just told them we have to be absolutely quiet."

"If they started crying, I would take their face and tell them, 'It's going to be OK,'" she continued. "I wanted that to be the last thing they heard, not the gunfire in the hall."

According to Roig, she did her best to remain strong, but she believed that she and her students were going to die. She wanted to be assured that the last thing the students heard were heartfelt words of love.

"I thought we were all going to die. I told the kids I love them and I was so happy they were my students. I said anyone who believed in the power of the prayer, we need to pray and those who don't believe in prayer, think happy thoughts," Roig recalled.

Roig and her students managed to survive the ordeal.

A special-needs teacher, Anne Marie Murphy, was found in her classroom slumped over young children killed in the shooting. Police believe she was using her body to shield her students. One student, Dylan Hockley, six, was found dead in her arms.

"We take great comfort in knowing that Dylan was not alone when he died," said Dylan's parents, Ian and [Nicole Hockley](#).

Police indicate that special-education aide Rachel D'Avino [died](#) in the same way, shielding one of the students during the rampage. D'Avino was unaware that her boyfriend, Anthony Cerritelli, had planned to ask her to marry him on Christmas Eve. Just days before the shooting, Cerritelli had asked her parents' permission to do so.

Students proved to be resourceful and heroic in the midst of this tragedy as well.



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Parent Robert Licata [told](#) WABC-TV that when the gunman burst into the classroom of his six-year-old son and shot the teacher, his son grabbed his friends and ran out the door to safety. "That's when my son grabbed a bunch of his friends and ran out the door," he said. "He was very brave. He waited for his friends."

A six-year-old girl, whose name is not being released, was the lone survivor of one of the two first-grade classrooms. She managed to live by [tricking](#) the gunman by playing dead, explained the girl's pastor.

"She ran out of the school building covered from head to toe with blood and the first thing she said to her mom was, 'Mommy, I'm OK but all my friends are dead,'" Pastor Jim Solomon told ABC News' Lara Spencer this weekend.

"Somehow, in that moment, by God's grace, [she] was able to act as she was already deceased," he said. And some of the children who managed to escape with their lives were fortunate enough to find refuge and comfort at a nearby home.

Yahoo News [reported](#) that Gene Rosen, a man who lives near Sandy Hook Elementary School, took six small children into his home after they had escaped Soto's classroom and did his best to provide them comfort in their hour of need.

Rosen had discovered the six children sitting in his driveway with a school bus driver. Rosen approached the group and one little boy explained, "We can't go back to school. Our teacher is dead. Mrs. Soto; we don't have a teacher."

Yahoo! News writes, "Rosen, a 69-year old retired psychologist, took the four girls and two boys into his home, and over the next few hours, gave them toys, listened to their stories and called their frantic parents."

He took the children for walks around his property, gave them an armful of stuffed animals he kept in his home, fed them, and sat with them to listen to their tales of horror.

The children's parents arrived to pick them up from Rosen's home, but Rosen recalled with horror an encounter with a parent whose child was not at his home. A frantic mother knocked on Rosen's door hours after the last child left, asking if her little boy was there. "Her face looked frozen in terror," Rosen said, breaking down in tears.

"She thought maybe a miracle from God would have the child at my house," he said. Later, "I looked at the casualty list ... and his name was on it."

These stories offer a glimpse of grace in an otherwise tragic situation. At this time, little can be said or done to take away the pain felt by a nation, a community, and the families and friends close to this horrific ordeal. But those who wish to help the victims and town of Sandy Hook and Newtown Connecticut should visit this [page](#) to find out how they may be of assistance, whether it be through emotional support, financial aid, or volunteer work.



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