

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP: SAM'S STORY!

When people ask me where I'm from, I always say Boca Raton, FL. My hometown is too small, too insignificant, too unremarkable to be noteworthy. That was my reasoning until 2018, anyway. Far too many people have heard of my hometown now. Chances are you have, too.

I'm from Parkland, FL. On February 14, 2018, 17 people were killed and 17 more were injured in one of the worst school shootings in American history. I was down the street from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as it transpired. This is the story of what I experienced.

It was Valentine's Day. I took my then-girlfriend out for brunch at around 1:45 that afternoon. I was broadcasting sports games for my old high school at the time, and coincidentally, there was a pre-season baseball game that night against Stoneman Douglas. So, the holiday festivities had to start early.

Around 2:30 PM, we left the restaurant and started walking to my car. The high school is right down this street. There was an ambulance and a sheriff's cruiser parked right close to me. Lights on, no sirens, but no sign of a car accident or anything like that. I didn't pay it much mind at first.

All of a sudden, all hell broke loose. Over a dozen police cars seemingly came out of nowhere and turned onto that street. I looked up to the sky and saw a helicopter heading in that direction, then two. I looked back to the ground and I saw terrified people running away.

I started reacting on instinct. I told my girlfriend to get in the car, keep her head down and away from the windows, and I would get us home. She kept checking Google as I drove 70 in a 45 mile an hour zone. As we pulled into my driveway, we saw the news alert: "Active Shooter in Parkland, FL."

We had four different news channels pulled up on our computers and phones, and they all showed where I just was. Anderson Cooper was talking about the roads I drove on every day. Outside my room, I heard my dad say, "Can you believe it? The next Columbine – right down the street."

In between frantically texting my loved ones that I was okay, I reached out to a friend of mine who worked for the city. He told me a business complex in my housing development was being used as a staging area to reunite the evacuated students with their families. I wanted to help however I could.

I filled my car with two cases of cold water and grabbed as many phone chargers as I could. It was chaos. There were hundreds of students, dozens of police officers, some in full SWAT gear, some in gym clothes and a bulletproof vest.

I had 50 cold bottles of water; I gave one to every officer I saw. I put multi-plugs in every charging port my car had, and told every student I came across that if their phone was dead and they couldn't contact their families, they could use my car to charge them or my phone to make a call.

An FBI agent came up to me after I had finished. I was standing around with my arms crossed and wearing a button-down, so he asked me, "Which agency are you with?" I told him I was a civilian trying to help; he laughed, told me I couldn't be there, and suggested I go wait with the press.

I approached a few reporters, told them I was a journalism student, and asked what I could do to help. For the next few hours, I carried camera equipment, provided WiFi, gave directions to camera vans, and believe it or not, two news channels allowed me to help them film some interviews.

One interview is forever burned into my mind. A mother just reunited with her special needs son, a 15-year-old student at Stoneman Douglas, four-and-a-half hours after the shooting. This is what she told us.

"I'm really, really happy to hear that he's okay. It's just been crazy. I went to the school, they gave me the runaround, I got stuck out here, and then I had to walk like one mile coming here, but it's just a relief to find out that he's okay. To see him, and to see him smiling and that he's okay, it's a blessing."

As haunting as that is, nothing will ever stick with me quite like what happened shortly afterwards. I was with reporters who were waiting for updates from the official press conference being held elsewhere. A cameraman ran over to us and said, "It's seventeen, guys. Seventeen were killed."

It honestly felt like time stood still. I looked around, and every professional journalist, hardened from covering death and destruction on a daily basis, was devastated. They had their heads in their hands. They were praying. It was the most powerful moment of my life.

Fortunately, I did not personally know any of the victims. But my friend's best friend was Jaime Guttenberg. My sister's biology lab partner was Nicholas Dworet. I still live just three miles from Stoneman Douglas High. And the shooter, who I will not name, once lived on my street.

When you see these mass tragedies on the news, it's impersonal. You say "that's terrible" and move on. You tell yourself "I'm glad that didn't happen to me." Parkland was statistically the safest city in Florida the year before the shooting. It's the last place this should've happened, and yet it did.

I sincerely hope that tragedy never comes as close to your home as it did to mine. I sincerely hope that none of you will ever be able to understand what I, or anyone in my town, went through, because you never experience anything resembling what I went through that sunny afternoon.

But in our country's current political climate, we have to confront the unfortunate reality that this could happen to any one of us. If, heaven forbid, a mass casualty situation comes to your door, all I ask is that you ask yourself, "**What can I do to help?**"

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