



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2023 National High School Essay Contest \$100 Award Winner

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Sniffles Turn to Snickers

On February 14th, 2018, the lives of thousands of Florida students changed forever. My life changed forever. On that day, I lost my best friend of nearly a decade: Cara Marie Loughran.

I'll admit that the grief I personally faced was not an easy hurdle, especially for a twelve-year-old. But it was nothing compared to what would face all Florida students for the rest of our high school careers. Our yearly "code red" drills became monthly. "All clear" being announced on the intercom systems no longer existed, now they began sharing codes only school staff would know - God forbid a school shooter decided to trick us out of hiding. The number of security guards at each school doubled. Every minor threat was met with full caution.

That is what I've experienced in the five years since the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. And I'll admit, for a few years these changes definitely did their jobs in keeping students cautious and concerned. But lately I've noticed a shift in the attitudes towards it, which I'd personally like to credit to the frequency of these "code red" drills. In my district - Broward County Public Schools - lockdown drills are conducted monthly. And this was initially frightening, but I've seen the way the mood is changing.

I implore you all to examine a classroom practicing a lockdown drill. Half the students are on their cell phones. Many don't fit in the designated "safety zone" because they're more concerned about bumping shoulders with each other than practicing proper safety measures. Many make faces at each other, giggling and snickering. Teachers complain about the over-frequent drills cutting into their lesson time. Some don't stop teaching at all - they just turn the lights off, put the door covers up, and continue teaching Algebra as if the intercoms aren't detailing methods to stay alive. As if school shootings don't occur at a frequency of one every seventy-seven days.

Sniffles Turn to Snickers

Of course, safety is always going to be the top priority, but what does it say about our nation that rather than normalizing heavier restrictions on guns, we're normalizing heavier rules on teenagers hiding in classroom corners? What does it say about us, that kindergarteners get sent to school for the first time already knowing what to do if their life is put in danger? What does it say about us, that you can buy an assault rifle and a bulletproof Hello Kitty backpack at the same gun convention?

But most frighteningly, what does it say about us that we've developed the ability to laugh it all away? Change needs to come while this country is still crying for it, because already, I can hear the sniffles turning into snickers. And I can see children joking about tragedies that should by no means be normalized.