

# ESSAYS ON VIOLENCE FROM STUDENTS AT JOHN F. KENNEDY HIGH SCHOOL, GRANADA HILLS, CALIFORNIA

**Willy Ackerman – English Teacher, Kennedy High School**

*Whether the bruises are physical or mental, the fear real or imagined, we are all – directly or indirectly – affected by violence. Though we create a relatively safe environment within the school, there is still the distance to be covered, by bus or by foot, between school and home. And for far too many, the most dangerous place of all is home itself. I stand in awe of my students who manage to survive – not only the very real dangers of their lives, but the emotional trauma as well – their dignity their hope, their charity in tact.*



**Aldo Velez**

When I was in the sixth grade I was threatened by one of my classmates. This boy was like the giant from “Jack in the Bean Stalk.” He was the giant, and I was Jack. He was one of those giants who liked to pick on people who were smaller than he was. I’ll bet that if I were the giant and he were Jack, he wouldn’t have wanted to mess with me.

He and his friend Slim socked me one day because I did not give him a scholastic paper; instead, I gave it to a really nice and pretty girl who I thought deserved it more.

One day, Bully told me that if I did not help him do his standards, he would stab me. At first I said, “NO!” But then I remembered that he and Slim had socked me, so I said okay.

I was dumb. I did not tell my teacher. I thought the school wouldn’t do anything. When my mom and dad found me locked inside my room crying, I told them what was going on in school, and the next day they went to my school and told the principal. The next thing I knew, the school had

expelled Bully for threatening me. I should have gone straight to my parents in the first place.

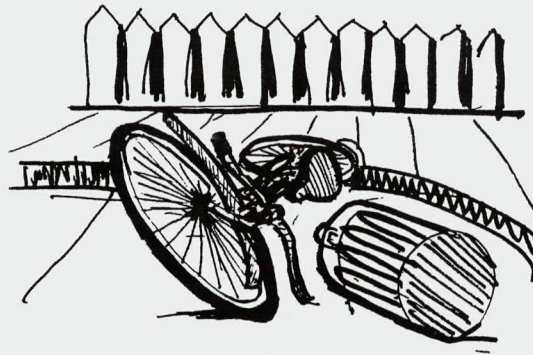
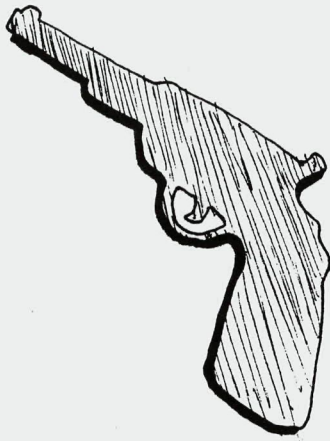
I should have stepped up to Bully, but like I said, he was one chunky giant. Also, my mom and dad didn’t want me to fight.

After all this happened in my elementary school, we decided to move away from that neighborhood so I could go to another school. Violence separated me from my best friends, friends I had known since first grade.

Still, sometimes I feel unsafe. I feel like going to school with a bulletproof vest on. I feel I might get shot with the kind of violence going on nowadays. What if I go outside and get caught in a gang shooting? Or a drive-by? Hey, I only have one life to make something of myself. But with the kind of violence today, I might not be alive to see my children grow up, or I might not even be alive to have children at all.

The school security guards don’t check everyone to see if they have a weapon. I think the staff of our schools should go to classrooms and check each person with the metal detectors; this way no one would get hurt, at least not in school.

If you are being threatened by someone, you must tell someone right away; your parents, your dean, or your teachers. Who cares if your friends make fun of you, as long as you’re alive. Violence is not the way to solve problems; it just makes the problem a lot worse. So just try to talk it over.



### Anonymous

In the evening hours of September 29, 1995, at a 7-11 Mini-Mart in Sun Valley, a 25-year-old male Caucasian was murdered by a teenage gang member with alleged mental problems. The victim was shot in the parking lot of the mini-mart after he'd used a pay phone to call his girlfriend. The perpetrator apparently thought the victim was a rival gang member. Few words were exchanged before the shooting occurred. The victim might have survived had his head not hit the pavement when he fell. Three hours after arriving at Holy Cross Hospital, he died from loss of blood.

The victim was my father's sister's son.

Just another statistic of violence. Every victim is somebody's father, son, brother, uncle, nephew, grandson, or cousin. Tony was a father with two very young sons, two boys who will never have a chance to know their daddy.

Violence affects everyone it touches, often changing their lives forever. The past can never be changed; the consequences of violence can never be undone, no matter how much it may be desired. All people need to think about the consequences of their actions. Maybe if they did, there would be less senseless violence.

### Stephanie Mora

It is a Saturday night, cold and pitch black. It's around 10:30 p.m. in the city of Bellflower. A seventeen-year-old guy is riding his bike home from his friend's house. He is just pulling up to his house when someone pushes him off the bike. He suddenly feels shocking thrusts of pain on his back, then his stomach and chest. He looks up and sees a black shadow; then after a blow to his head, he blacks out....

This guy is not a perfect little school-boy, but he is not a serious criminal either. He is one of those guys in a rough neighborhood, hanging around with the wrong crowd. He has great art skills; the way he expresses those skills is by tagging on building walls. One day he was out with his friends, helping a friend draw a picture on a wall. While doing this they crossed out a "gang's" name.

He paid the consequence.

His mother runs out of the house in her robe after hearing someone yell. She sees her son a few feet away from her front gate, lying on the ground unconscious. She sees blood coming from cuts on his eyes and a busted lip. There is blood coming from his nose and his head. She can barely recognize him from all the blood. Her first thought is that he must be dead. She runs in and calls 911; he is rushed to the hospital in an ambulance along with his mother. The doctor comes in and explains to his mother that her son has gone into a coma from a blow to the head with a metal bat.

Day after day she goes to the hospital hoping to find her son awake. Day after day there is no progress. He has been in a coma



for two and a half months now. The doctors tell his mother that there are slim chances that he will wake up, and if he does, he will never walk again. After three months, he wakes up from the coma. He will have to go through months of therapy.

This story is not a "what if?" or an imaginary story. This really happened. It happened to a friend of mine. The whole experience is traumatic and painful. He never saw the faces of the guys who almost killed him.

Violence surrounds us all in everyday life, and we have become so accustomed to it that we don't even consider anymore that something is wrong. Knowing that people can get away with crimes makes me feel very angry. If criminals plan out exactly what they want to do, they can get away with it.

Knowing that some teens see violence as entertainment is sad. Do we really have to see others get hurt in order to get pleasure? Perhaps that is why teens can hurt each other without thinking twice. When teens see their favorite singers involved in gangs and violence, they don't think it is wrong. They see how successful singers have become even though they are involved in all those things. Why should they stop being violent? Even governments use violence to solve problems. Whatever happened to "Violence isn't the answer?"



### Edgar Garcia

Violence has affected us in the sense that we don't feel safe anymore. The recent tragedy at Columbine High School is an example that makes one think: Why is this happening? Who is to blame? Is this happening more often? We still hear that school is the safest place to be, but we at Kennedy High School in Granada Hills may think differently after what happened at the Jewish Center in neighboring North Hills a couple of months ago.

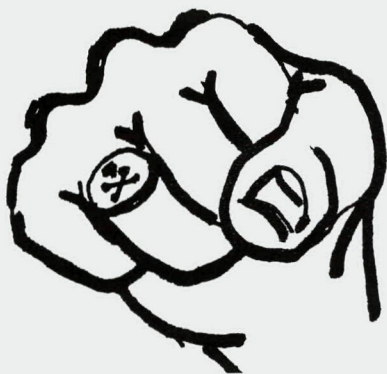
I personally experienced some of this violence in middle school where my best friend had a pocketknife pulled on him. This happened because my friend once stepped on the attacker's new sneaker shoes. It was all an accident, but the attacker did not buy that it was an accident so he threatened vengeance. Sure enough, from that day on he and his friends started picking on my friend and seemed to enjoy it.

The incident took place in the yard of our middle school during P.E. Although teachers were outside, they never saw it happen. My friend was just minding his own business when the attacker got him in a choke hold and in a flash pulled out a slim, red knife that looked like a Swiss Army knife. As I approached them the attacker let my friend go and started saying filthy words.

My friend never told his parents about his problem with this boy until the incident with the pocketknife. When the incident happened, my friend was a little shaken up, but afterwards he was fine. Although nothing happened, I still can't believe that I experienced this sort of violence at school at the age of 12. I sometimes think that if the attacker had been under the influence of drugs, the outcome could have been a lot different, possibly being that I would be visiting my friend at the cemetery instead of his house.

The aggressor was expelled from that school and has never been seen again. Who can be blamed? Is our government doing enough to prevent this? Now that I am in high school I fear even more because so

many kids like the attacker are around. So many questions come to mind: When will it all end? How bad is it going to get? And who will stop it?



### Daniela Arellano

The smell of sweat, the yells and the laughter of other high school students permeated the humid air. I had put on my white gym clothes and was coming out of the locker rooms when a tall, bald boy with fair skin, bulging muscles, and angry eyes walked directly up to a brown skinned boy, about three inches shorter and chunkier, pushed him and yelled, “you f\*\*king cunt! What are you looking at, you stupid fat a\_\_?” Naturally Boy Two, who had done nothing to Boy One, pushed back. This triggered a series of punches and kicks, more pushing, and more kicking. A crowd of excited students formed around the two boys. Finally after a couple of minutes, two male administrators pulled the boys apart. The aggressor laughed at his chunky opponent. “Stupid cunt,” he said conversationally. The hapless boy, bleeding from the nose and lip, his left eye already beginning to get puffy and purple, appeared as if he wanted to cry. Surely embarrassed by the crowd circled around him, he held the tears back as he was led to the Dean’s office. I never saw either boy again.

My mother has always taught me right from wrong. She has helped me understand the pain that not only the kids go through, but also their parents, whenever kids are involved in violence. I know that my

mother would be heartbroken to see me come home bruised and bleeding, just as any other parent would. Therefore, parents have the moral responsibility to impose these beliefs upon their children. Reprimanding them when they do wrong is a good way to start.

I believe that there are many things that contribute to violence in schools. We must ask ourselves not only who, but also what is to blame. We must go outside the schools and observe the daily influences on students. Environments, role models, friends, music, and dress style all affect them. Family traditions, values, and habits might encourage a child to feel that it is okay to mimic what they see at home. Students might act violently toward others whom they believe don’t fit in for whatever reason. Groups might use their numbers to feel superior to others.

Schools can help reduce violence among their students. Grant High School has already taken action by having students sign petitions promising that they will not engage in violent acts. Workshops for teachers, such as Impact Training, offer tactics for teachers to help students with conflicts. Schools should also speak to the students in assemblies. Exploring the danger and cruelty involved in the acts of violence will make students less likely to fight with others. By having students imagine themselves as the parents of the kids who are being beaten, or as the victims themselves, might make them think twice about what they are doing. Teachers should teach their students the immorality of violence. The ideas that work in some schools should be passed on to others as well.

All I ask is that there be more programs and activities in which kids are taught to keep the peace among themselves. Some programs will not eliminate violence completely, but will make a difference – saving lives and sorrow.





### Sean Haltsead

Violence, it seems, cannot be avoided. It always exists in one form or another. It kind of makes me feel uncomfortable. I do have to admit that I have been violent in the past, but in the world we live in today, people and kids can be very cruel. They will hurt you in order to get what they want. People have to protect themselves.

Hiding his intentions, the gangster said, "Let's take a walk," pleasantly to Brian, my friend and longtime neighbor, who had been walking from fifth to sixth period, not expecting violence. "Na, I got no beef," he said, which meant, "I don't want to fight." Another gangster jumped down from a low wall, ran towards him, and hit him in the face. Six or seven guys surrounded my friend. My friend grabbed one and smashed his face up pretty badly. Then he turned and got hit in the head again. He grabbed the second guy, and socked him in the side of the face. He was throwing punches left and right. He didn't connect too many times after that, but he was never off his feet. Despite his 5'11", 260-pound frame, he never had a chance.

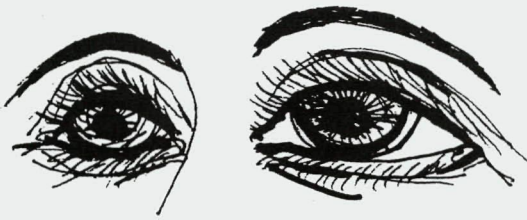
The school police arrived, the gangsters scattered, and my friend was taken to the office. He was expelled "for his own good." But if he felt in enough danger, he would have taken the initiative on his own. When Brian got jumped, I felt angry because this gang is big. It's called San Fernando. (This valley is large!) They heard that my friend said "F\*\*ck Santa Fe." He never said it though. They had been taunting him.

I am a white teenager at age 15, and I am a minority in a lot of places, including where I live. I have been violent in the past. Last summer some guy was messing with me, doing things that pissed me off. I told him, "Go f\*\*k yourself," and punches flew. A big reason why people fight is that they want to be the biggest, and the strongest, and in control of others. I have also been jumped and on the receiving end of the fighting, but I ran and luckily my quickness got me away from serious injury. I was jumped because they thought that I was a white supremacist (I am not), but they didn't tolerate any of that.

What causes violence? Life is a battle of power. If you have a lot of power, you can intimidate others, even manipulate them. If someone has this power, and another is competing for the same power, they will easily get violent. I understand this because I see it all the time. I watch and observe sometimes when people are yelling and screaming. I think we need a system to settle these conflicts, and whoever thinks of a way to release the pressure and settle these conflicts is going to be thanked by a lot of people.

Can we ever rid ourselves of violence? The process of moving away from violence is hard and grueling. I think that the key to abolishing most violence is to resolve all those tiny problems. If we do that, we will all get along much better, and we will not be able to do this without a way to release stress and built up emotions. Maybe if we're all honest and straight out, we can solve a lot of problems originating from miscommunication.





### Jessica Barraza

Everyone sees things through their own eyes, their race, their country, their values. A White sees things through his White eyes; a Black sees things through his Black eyes. Here I will see things through my own Mexican eyes.

It seems everyone looks at Mexicans as lazy, criminal, and useless. People often see us as violent. And sometimes we are, in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Violence is a means of survival. In order to survive we do little things, which cause bigger things to happen.

Violence surrounds us. It's on the streets, in the media, in schools, and even in homes. I've experienced violence in my life, but more have experienced worse. One time I went to the park to meet an old friend of mine. Yes, he was from a gang, and yes, he was armed. At that moment, my supposed *homies* (slang for true friends) passed by. They also were in gangs – rival gangs. They pulled up on the parking lot as I was talking to my friend; they grabbed him and pulled a shank against his throat. They were about to slice it in front of me, and they wouldn't have even cared. Yup! True homies they were. Two policemen on bikes just watched. The guy with the knife ran away and the policemen just watched.

Violence surrounds us. Kids grow up seeing incessant violence, and the result is that violence is the only way they know how to cope. Little kids want to hang with the big kids. They see money and drugs pass back and forth. Drugs and money lead to violence and gangs. It's about territory and protection. Once you step out of your own hood, you're dead. Like a turtle uses its shell for protection, a gangster uses its hood.

In September, 1996, a famous rapper, Tupac Shakur, was shot and killed after a

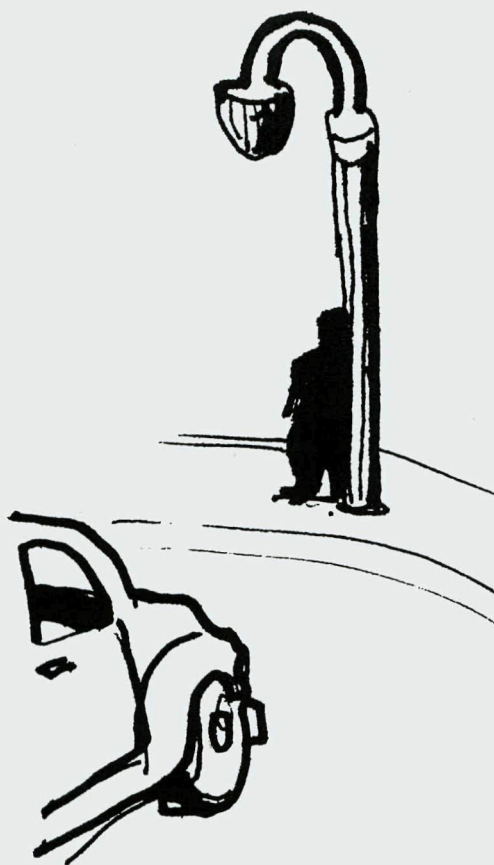
Tyson vs. Holyfield fight; the case has still not been solved. Six months later, another famous rapper, Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, was also shot and killed; the murder case has not been solved. In June 1999, a close friend of mine was shot and killed by a rival gang; seven months later the murder case has still not been solved. In 1999, there was the shooting in Columbine, Colorado. Two kids with guns went to their high school and shot twenty-five people, including themselves. Many have been lost, and nothing has been solved.

What usually happens when students get caught in a fight at school? They get suspended or expelled. Zero tolerance policy after the fact is useless. Why can't teachers and counselors intervene before the problem escalates to violence? What are the prizes for violence? Nothing! What do we get out of it? Nothing! As time passes, so do people. Too many people are shot everyday.

Violence surrounds us. It's true, actions speak louder than words, and teens do need role models. We also need words of wisdom. What are the words of wisdom? We don't know! Where do we get wisdom? Does it come from inside ourselves? Does it come from around us? In homes, many do have role models. My father, who drinks sometimes, takes his anger out on us. Sometimes he doesn't know who he is. Alcoholic parents can affect the teens who live with them.

Changes are all part of life. Good or bad, big or small. We must learn from our mistakes. What I see through my naked Mexican eyes is an American culture in conflict; Mexicans are placed under a microscope; there is a double standard. But there is hope. The cause and changes come within us. We can make a difference within ourselves. With God's help, we can increase the Peace!

Too many tears have been wiped, too many shoulders have been leaned on, and too many coffins have been buried. We need to end the violence.



### Victor Razzo

When I was growing up, the police spent more time in my apartment complex than anywhere else. By the time I was seven, I had heard my downstairs' neighbor being robbed for everything he had, and shot dead because it wasn't enough.

But my earliest memory, and the event that I remember the most, is this: I went to a nearby church with my mom and brother. On our way there I saw a man standing near a street light. Although his black and white checkered shirt and his creased oversized khaki pants with black Nike shoes were bathed in the soft orange glow from the lamp above him, his face was covered in a pitch-black shadow. The word "anonymous" comes to mind.

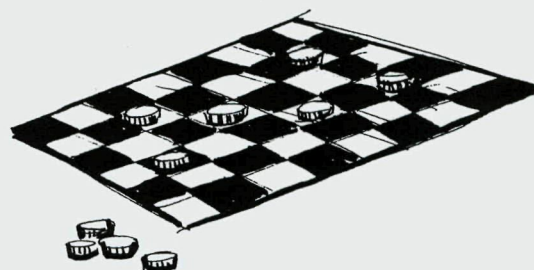
My mom told me not to stare at the anonymous man and to keep walking. My attention was directed back to the clothed shadow that was now about half a block behind us, when another shadow with the silhouette of a car stopped across the street

from the man and another shadow got out of the car and I walked toward the street light. When we were about two blocks past the shadows, I heard two voices behind me arguing loudly.

My desire to see what the whole thing was about stopped me from moving and made me turn back to look at the source of the yelling. Soon, I saw the second shadow reach out his arm and point it at the upright pile of clothes. The really loud noise that followed suppressed my curiosity as a new feeling took over my body: FEAR. My mom grabbed my arm and yanked me along as she ran the rest of the way to the church.

When we got there, my mom was yelling at me, telling me *nunca, nunca, nunca te pares a ver dos personas discutiendo*. Never, never, never stop to see two people arguing. I felt sad and thought I had done something wrong. But I know now that she wasn't yelling at me because I had done something wrong, but because she too will always remember the anonymous man with no face.

She too will live with unrelenting fear.



### Anonymous

I am a healthy, strong, and talented 15-year-old girl. I am involved in many activities in and out of school. I play on the girls' varsity volleyball, soccer, and track teams at Kennedy High School. I am very happy with my life, but underneath, I have a dark secret.

*I remember...*

I am eight. My dad and I are playing checkers in the living room. My mom and my sister are watching television. It seems



like a nice peaceful family night. But as we are playing my dad moves his checker to my side of the board. I forget to king him. He gets angry and starts to yell. I get scared and pee in my pants. It seeps into the carpet and I start to cry. He sees that I peed in my pants and gets even more angry. He gets up, pulls my hair and shoves my face into the place where I peed, rubbing my face into it. My mom screams at him, but she doesn't try to stop him. He finally stops when the side of my face begins to get raw. My mom and her start to yell at each other. He gets even angrier. He gets up and goes to his room, and slams the door. My mom and my sister comfort me. My mom is trying to clean my face in the bathroom when, 15 minutes later, he comes from his room into the bathroom and gives me his Rolex watch as a sorry gift. My mom forgives him. But I don't.

I'm left with a big scab on my face. When people ask me what happened, I say that I fell off my bike. The scar stays for a couple of months, then finally fades. But the memory of it never goes away.

*I remember...*

I am ten years old. I'm walking down the hallway and I get in my dad's way. He grabs me by the shirt. He throws me to the ground so hard that my shirt rips while I'm being thrown. I start crying. My mom isn't home. He tells me not to tell my mom what happened. I'm forced to keep this secret from my mother.

*I remember...*

I am 14 years old. It's summer. It's hot and humid, and I get a rash which spreads all over my face and arms. I come home from school one day and my dad looks at me. "You're getting uglier by the day." The words hurt, and I feel abused.

*I remember...*

I am 14. My parents and I are watching a movie on TV. The year 1492 comes up and my dad asks me what it means. I get nervous and say, "I don't know." He gets mad and calls me a "stupid ass." He won-

ders how I'm so stupid, and how I can't even answer a simple question. "1492 is the year when Columbus found the new world," he yells. The thing is, whenever I talk to him, I get so nervous.

*I remember...*

I am 14. I'm at my grandma's house in Arizona. The phone rings, and my dad is on the other line. He doesn't even say "Hi" to me, he just asks for my grandma (his mother). She gets on the phone, and then starts to yell. When she gets off the phone, I ask her, "What happened?" She said that my parents got in a fight over my sister's behavior. I start crying, for I know what my mom is going through, and I wish I could be there with her. Then my grandma says, "Your mom doesn't realize how much your dad has helped this family. When she was a single parent, he put a roof over your head." That gets me angry. My own grandma doesn't know that her son hits and abuses us, I think.

I'm too weak to start anything, but those words get me thinking. I figure out that my parents have only been together for 12 years, and I am 14. How is that possible? This question will stay with me until the end of summer.

Then I go to stay with my sister one weekend, and my question is answered. We stay up one night talking about our past. I catch a sentence that doesn't sound right. "We weren't evil step children," she says. I finally figure out my life.

My mom was married before and my dad isn't my biological father. I find out my biological father left my mother on her own with two children, that he got remarried, and that I have a half brother out there somewhere, a whole other family that I haven't met. The thing that hurts me is that my own mom didn't tell me this. I had to find out by myself. Every night I would think about how the other side of my family is out there somewhere, how my dad wasn't actually my real dad, how my sister and I would get hit by and abusive jerk. And how I would cry myself to sleep.



When I was 14 I wanted to end my life. I would think how I wouldn't have anymore pain, physical or mental. But as I kept thinking, I knew I didn't want to leave my mom or sister. I loved them too much to lose them. I kept thinking how I wanted a future: to go to college, to get a good job doing something I love, and to start my own family. All of these thoughts kept circling in my head. I wasn't going to let some abusive jerk stand in the way of my happiness.

I'm going to have a great future with a great family. I've promised myself that when I have children, I won't be my dad. I won't hit my kids, and I won't call them names.

I am 15 years old now. I am on the girls' varsity volleyball, soccer, and track teams for Kennedy High School. I'm involved in many activities such as Key Club and CSF. I am strong. My dad doesn't physically abuse me anymore, though. Whenever he says something harsh to me, I just let it in one ear and out the other. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

I have the greatest sister in the world who reminds me everyday that I will never be alone. I have a whole future ahead of me. However, the past I hide will never be erased. It will stay with me forever.

But I am strong.

### **Stacey Valentino**

In 1998, a shooting occurred near my school, Kennedy High School in North Hills. This affected the whole community, because we were all in danger. My school was locked down for four long hours; all doors and windows were locked, and no one was allowed in or out. Everyone was so hungry and had to go to the bathroom really bad, but we weren't allowed out of our classrooms because we needed to be kept safe. Everyone intensely watched the clock waiting to be let out. We were finally let out an hour after school was supposed to end.

Even though I wasn't harmed physically during the lockdown, I was still affected mentally. The next day at school I took

more precautions about what was happening around me. I started using the bathrooms at school more than one time during throughout the school day. For a while I had a very hard time concentrating on the material given in class. My mind wandered off in different directions and I couldn't sit still in my seat. I constantly thought about what I would have done if someone had gotten hurt. I also began to question why it happened so close to my school. To better prepare myself for future incidents, I started taking school practice drills more seriously and listened to directions my teachers gave me. I figured that if this kind of a situation ever happened again then I wouldn't be caught off guard; I would be prepared.

The day after the shooting and lockdown, my parents wouldn't let me stay after school with my friend. They still make me come straight home. Since there is so much fear of violence, my parents won't even let me ride my bike by myself. I am paranoid just going for a jog or walk around my own neighborhood. My parents won't let me go to parties that they don't approve of. If an adult is not in charge at the party, then my being able to go is completely out of the question. For instance, if a friend of mine is planning to have an open house party, my parents won't let me go. They are afraid gang members will crash the party. They also know that someone will bring beer or drugs, and trouble will start. They completely trust me; it's other people they don't trust.

Since there seems to be violence everywhere, I have learned how to cope with it. Everywhere I go I constantly take precautions using my eyes and ears to check on what's happening around me. Even though some people are not physically harmed by violence, they are still emotionally affected. □

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