

Finding Answers to Violence and A Way to Remember Maggie

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By Susan M. Omilian

In the early morning hours of Sunday, October 17, I received a phone call at my home in Connecticut that my niece, Maggie, a nineteen year old college sophomore, was shot three times and killed in a college dormitory room in Kalamazoo, Michigan, by her ex-boyfriend. The young man, a junior at the same school with whom she had broken off casually dating several months ago, killed her with a shotgun that he had purchased legally several weeks before and then killed himself. Maggie had rejected him it seemed and in response, he lured her into his dorm room under the pretense of wanting her to look at something he had written, pulled out the gun and in a matter of minutes ended her life and his.

As I tried to take in this shocking news in the middle of the night, all I could think of was that this was another senseless act of violence in our society but this time, Maggie – our Maggie – was dead.

How could that be? Ever since she was two years old and my brother married her mother following a divorce from Maggie's father, Maggie and her brother have been a part of our family as if they had been born into it. Maggie also had the love of her mother's and father's families too along with the admiration and support of many teachers and school administrators who recognized her extraordinary talents and gifts from a very early age. Then too numerous friends and acquaintances saw her as someone who was always kind to everyone, even the man who would one day shoot her dead.

As I lay awake the rest of that night unable to sleep, I realized that even with all the love, attention and energy showered on this child that she so richly deserved, none of us could keep her safe. We couldn't protect her from the violence in our society that has grown progressively more senseless and incomprehensible. Why is it that with so many school shootings around the country it has become commonplace for students who are rejected by other students turn to violence to settle the score?

When I returned to Michigan for Maggie's funeral, I joined other family members and friends in celebrating her short but wonderful life and then we buried her body in a

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quiet cemetery near her home. While we prayed for her soul, we were bewildered and outraged that this could have happened to Maggie. For hours, we sat talking around the kitchen table trying to make sense of it all. As Catholics, we found some solace in the fact that Maggie is now at peace with God and that her soul journey on this earth is over. But as Maggie's parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and dear friends, we also felt the need to blame someone or something for this terrible tragedy.

But who *is* to blame when students shoot other students?

Is the school to blame? It had a no-guns-on-campus policy and yet this young man had a shot gun hidden in his room for some period of time. Should the college have done more to enforce that policy? Or should it have better informed women students about what to do when they were being stalked? Don't they know that the potential for violence is everywhere even on a quiet college campus in small Michigan town?

Is society to blame? Why is it that we can't pass more restrictions on the purchase and use of guns even after tragedies like Maggie's happen every day? While gun control legislation has passed on the state and federal level, this young man was still able to purchase a sophisticated weapon by posing as a deer hunter at a local gun store and waiting only twenty-four hours before he could take his purchase home.

What about violence against women? In the torrent of publicity about Maggie's death in the newspapers and on television in the Michigan area, we as a family tried hard not to have the circumstances leading to Maggie's death be portrayed as a "lover's quarrel." Maggie was stalked by a young man who appeared to be quiet, reserved and non-violent but nonetheless was capable of killing a woman he could not possess and who clearly rejected him with as much kindness as she could. As a feminist and an attorney who has worked on violence against women issues for years, it is very hard for me to fathom that my niece was the victim of anti-female violence. Although I had founded a rape crisis center in the Detroit area, represented battered women as a divorce lawyer when I lived in Kalamazoo, and authored three books on sexual harassment and sex discrimination after I moved to Connecticut, obviously none of my hard work was enough to save Maggie. Women are raped, battered and killed by men daily and now my niece is one of those statistics.

Should we blame his young man's parents? Recently several families of the children killed at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, have filed suits against the parents of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. But can they legally establish that these parents had a duty to "control" their children's actions and prevent their violent rampage? And if they do, would it mean that other parents will now control their children and these killings will stop? Probably not.

So who can we blame for Maggie's death? Everyone and no one, it would seem. And what can we do so that someone else's family won't suffer as ours has? We aren't sure. But that doesn't mean that we can't do something to make sure that Maggie and how she died is not soon forgotten. I found inspiration in what some other families of children killed and wounded at Columbine have chosen to do. They are forgoing litigation and working instead on gun control and other things that will preserve their children's memory and hopefully prevent other tragedies like this from happening ever again.

Whatever we do as a family, it must heal us and let us get on with our lives. Maggie would have wanted it that way. She would have wanted all of us who loved her so dearly to find in the way she lived and died solace, hope for the future and a way to forgive.

Adrienne Rich said what we are looking for the best.

"My heart is moved by all that I cannot save: so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world."