



*After It All*  
**FALLS APART**

Schools hit by disasters face mental health challenges

*Glenn Cook*



Over the past several months, J.R. “Rusty” Norman has become used to crowds and a large media presence at school board meetings. But with classes back in session and a routine business agenda on tap, he thought the board might catch a break at its second meeting of the new school year.

“I should have known better,” says Norman, a retired grandfather who chairs the school board in Santa Fe, Texas. “Everything’s different now.”

Just how different things are was on full display on this mid-September evening, four months after a 17-year-old gunman killed 10 people and wounded 13 at Santa Fe High School. The boardroom was packed with parents, most of them family members and close friends of the dead and injured. Cameras from TV stations in Houston captured the pain, emotions, and finger-pointing as audience members paid tribute to the victims and chastised the district for its handling of a recent text message threat at the high school.

“Trust fell apart the minute that happened on May 18,” Superintendent Leigh Wall says of the shooting. “We’ve been responding and starting to rebuild, but now we are seeing some of the long-term issues we are having to face, and many of them have to do with trust. In some ways, we’re all still trying to make some sense of it.”

Helping students and staff deal with trauma and grief, whether it is caused by a single event or a series of less dramatic incidents that build up over time, is critical for school districts because of the potential long-term impact on teaching and learning. Studies have shown that children and adults exposed to repetitive trauma are at risk for a variety of physical and mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, and a propensity for substance abuse.

And this process is doubly complicated in Santa Fe, which also saw 1,000 families affected by Hurricane Harvey in August 2017. No district can be fully prepared for a large-scale traumatic event, let alone two in a single school year.

“This is going to be a long-term issue in this community, because you have both trauma and loss,” says Julie Kaplow, director of the Texas Children’s Hospital Trauma and Grief (TAG) Center. “With Harvey, there are all kinds of trauma reminders. With the shooting, there are not just trauma reminders but also loss reminders. And the grief is what lingers for years and years and years.”

### LIFE SAFETY WORRIES

Understanding the effects of trauma and grief on students

and staff has drawn increased attention from researchers over the past two decades. But, in schools, moving from attention to action has been a tougher slog, partly because of a widespread reluctance to address mental health issues and partly due to the day-to-day nature of running complex operations that offer few opportunities for long-term planning.

“Schools are such profoundly stressed systems that most do not have the time to do the groundwork among all the demands that they are dealing with,” says Christopher Blodgett, director of the Child and Family Research Unit at Washington State University. “It’s very tough to motivate yourself to take on the additional hours and hours of outreach and relationship building against the possibility of a tragedy coming.”

Sudden tragedy brings the realization that no one is immune, and often leaves the community feeling unmoored and disconnected, says David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for Crisis and Bereavement, based at the University of Southern California. Those tasked with rebuilding become fair game.

“When a crisis occurs, the individuals involved in that feel out of control and powerless because they are unable to change what happened, so they try to exert a lot more control afterward,” Schonfeld says. “People become very passionate about their beliefs and what is important, and the views are often divergent. The one thing you can predict is that everyone will have strong opinions, and none will be the same.”

The reason, he believes, is “if you don’t think someone has made a mistake or was incompetent, that means it could happen again. That’s not acceptable to people. They believe someone had to make the very big mistake, not the shooter or Mother Nature, but someone in authority.”

The afternoon after the board meeting, a group of Santa Fe officials led by Wall and Norman gathered in a conference room. They already had met with area press that day to discuss what had occurred the previous evening and were preparing for staff training the next day with administrators. Everyone looked exhausted.

“What happened at that meeting is an example of trauma and grief, or one of the stages of grief, in which anger comes out because people are trying to find some rational explanation for something that’s irrational,” Wall told them. “We had two life safety worries in a school year, and that can’t help but impact the community significantly.”

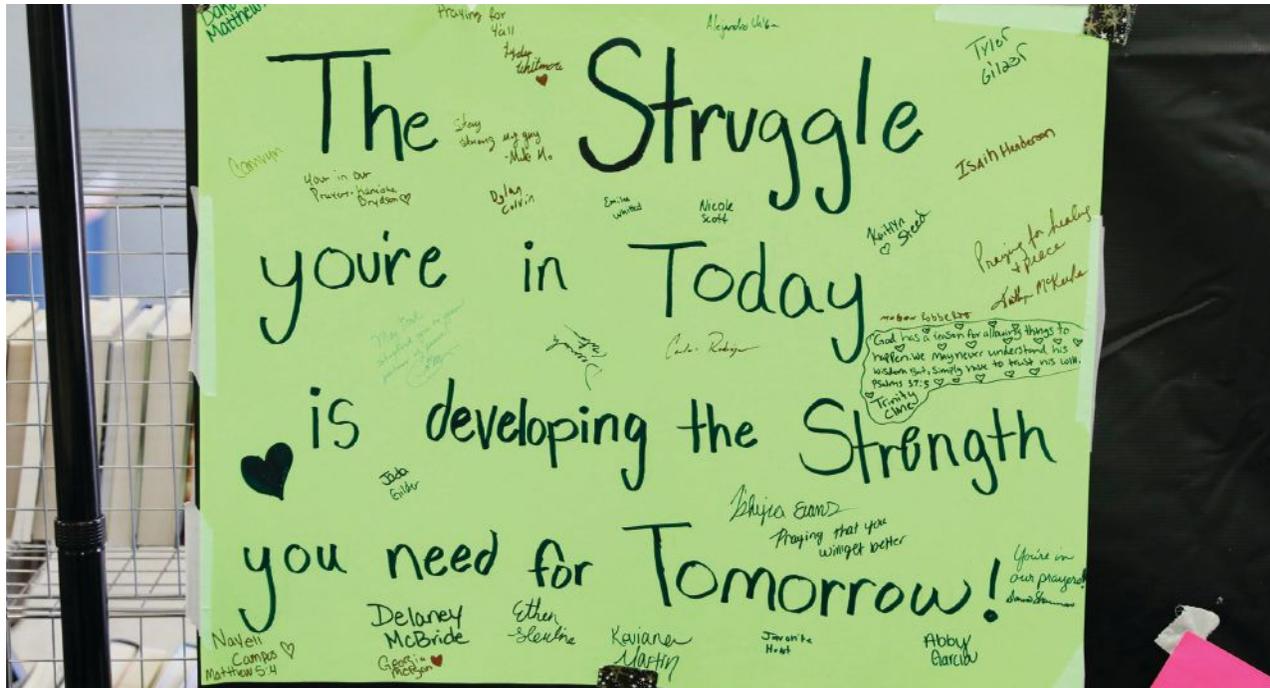


PHOTO CREDIT: GLENN COOK

**MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**

Like many rural communities, Santa Fe prides itself on its small-town feel and independence. Most residents go out of town to work, either in the nearby petrochemical plants or at one of the two major hospitals that serve the region. Most extracurricular activities revolve around schools and churches.

Hunting is popular in the spring and fall. Even though some Santa Fe students participated in walkouts following the Parkland shootings earlier this year, conversations about gun control are non-starters for most residents here.

“We were not and are not involved in a major political battle,” Norman says. “We are not fighting that right now.”

The fights, he concedes, are on other fronts. Since May, the district has spent more than \$1 million to “harden” its schools, adding a threat assessment team and five more full-time police officers. All students and staff must wear identification badges while on campus. Classrooms now have panic buttons, and school entrances have metal detectors.

“We’ve done as much as we can in hardening the schools, but that’s only a deterrent. It’s not a fix to the problem. It’s the longer-term things, especially around mental health and counseling, that we don’t have all the answers to yet,” Norman says. “We don’t know the time frame for that,

or how far this actually reaches. We just don’t know.”

Thanks to a state grant, the district has added three licensed professional mental health counselors and a family and marriage counselor at the high school to help students and employees work through post-traumatic stress issues. These are in addition to the school counselors already on staff.

“School counselors are trained to be school counselors; they are not trained to be licensed professional counselors,” says Assistant Superintendent Jackie Shuman, who supervises the district’s student services staff. “We still have three grade levels of students at the school who were present and experienced what happened on that day. We need intensive mental health support for at least three years, if not longer.”

**‘NO ONE IS LEFT OUT OR LEFT ALONE’**

Carol Gaylord knows more than she cares to about trauma and grief. Her father was murdered on Memorial Day weekend in 1983 in Santa Fe, an event that she describes as “the start of a journey to where I am today.” She has an adult son with autism and is close friends with the family of one of the shooting victims.

A 35-year Santa Fe resident and chair of the youth min-

istry team at Aldersgate United Methodist Church, Gaylord retired as CEO of the Coastal Community Credit Union on May 11. Seven days later, she was at the Galveston County Courthouse seeking adult guardianship of her son when she heard about the shooting.

“We started tracking down our youth to make sure everyone was safe, and the only one we had not heard from was Jared,” Gaylord says, referring to student Jared Black. “His mother Pam called because he didn’t get off the bus at the reunification center, and she was at the school waiting to hear word. I went over there until that evening when she heard that he had not survived.

“It was probably the hardest day of my life. I can’t even imagine what she went through,” Gaylord says.

The next day, a family assistance center was set up at Aldersgate to house emergency management personnel, the FBI, the American Red Cross, and counselors from the Gulf Coast Center, the mental health agency that serves Galveston and Brazoria counties. The goal, Gaylord says, was to set up a “one-stop place” to help victim’s families “walk through, step by step, what they needed to do.”

By the end of May, the temporary site became what is now known as the Santa Fe Resiliency Center. Funded by a state grant and now a city department, it hired Gaylord as its director in July.

Mental health counselors from the Gulf Coast Center are on site seven days a week, available from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. to talk with those affected by the shootings and the hurricane. Volunteers help sort the myriad donations that have come in from across the country, and the center also is hosting social activities and training on dealing with trauma and grief.

The Resiliency Center will remain at Aldersgate for a year, but Gaylord hopes to move to a permanent building in nearby Runge Park. City leaders have talked about turning it into a community youth center, which she says is “the dream,” but for now she is pleased to be “doing something to help those who need it the most.”

“At one of our training sessions, Julie Kaplow [of the TAG center] mentioned that when something like this happens, 78 percent of people remain resilient, which means it’s the 22 percent that we need to focus on,” she says. “That figure has just stuck in my head. A lot of times you don’t want to face the fear, so you avoid it. What we need to teach our teachers, counselors, and parents is how to detect the 22 percent to make sure that no one is left out or left alone.”



PHOTO CREDIT: GLENN COOK

Scenes from the Santa Fe Resiliency Center.

**SANTA FE  
STRONG**



**MAY 18TH**

**2018**

Kaplow, in a later interview, notes the number was taken from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration website and does not necessarily apply to Santa Fe. She says everyone responds differently and in varying degrees to trauma and grief.

“With grief, there is this mistaken notion that one year out you should be over it, and that may go for trauma as well,” she says. “I’ve certainly heard repeatedly that there is an assumption you should be over it, but what people don’t fully understand is that grief comes in waves. It doesn’t go away; it just changes.”

## RESTORE CONNECTEDNESS

Several miles from Santa Fe, in the former Mall of the Mainland, is the Gulf Coast Center, one of 39 such facilities across Texas. The center contracts with the state to provide mental health counseling and substance abuse services as well as assistance to residents with disabilities, individuals with HIV, and military veterans.

Melissa Tucker, the center’s CEO, met Shuman at the reunification center on May 18. Since then, Tucker and her counseling staff have worked closely with teachers, students, and parents to help them understand the differences between post-traumatic stress and grief and “what’s needed under each of those circumstances.”

“At every point, we’ve been working to help them process what happened and help them to regain a sense of security and safety,” Tucker says, noting that additional counselors will be on call as the holidays and first anniversary of the shooting approach. “People are processing what happened and how it affects them at different points, and we are working to help them restore some sense of connectedness to their community and to their school.”

Shuman says the relationship the district has developed with Tucker and other community partners such as Texas Children’s Hospital and the Office of Emergency Management has convinced her that schools do not pay enough attention to mental health in developing crisis response plans.

“It is overlooked in schools’ crisis response plans because typically we’re looking at the police response, the emergency response, the public information piece of it,” she says. “Those are all very important, but we have to be looking forward too, and what we’ve been able to bring to life through this partnership is more attention to the importance of mental health support.”

That support is necessary for staff as well, especially

during the first year. Patti Hanssard, Santa Fe’s assistant superintendent for human resources, says the district did not see higher than average resignations between May and the start of the school year, but notes some staff members are “still struggling.”

Micere Keels, an associate professor at the University of Chicago who has developed a trauma-informed curriculum for urban teachers, says staff are often so concerned about their students that they suppress their own needs, which, if not addressed, can lead to large staff turnover in trauma-affected schools.

“We recognize the need for counseling for students, but one thing we often forget to attend to is that staff have that same level of need for them to cope and manage with it,” Keels says. “In the rush to provide support to students, which is really critical, it’s important to remember how staff are affected. If the staff isn’t functioning well, the school can’t function.”

## NEW LESSONS

More than a year after Hurricane Harvey and several months after the shooting, the phrase “Santa Fe Strong” remains omnipresent in the schools and throughout the community. But at times, the words seem as aspirational as they do real.

“You can do all of the drills, have all the practice. Your policies and procedures can be in good order,” Shuman says. “But you are never truly prepared for the aftermath of this type of event. Since that day, we’ve all been focused on the recovery aspect. That is our number one responsibility, providing help to those who need it on an ongoing basis, so we can move forward.”

This fall, Texas Children’s Hospital is working on a large-scale needs assessment across the district to identify the students who are struggling the most. School and Resiliency Center staff will continue to receive training on trauma- and grief-informed interventions. And Wall notes the district is learning new lessons “every step along the way.”

“The action plans we have put in place are based on previous lessons learned from Columbine, from Sandy Hook, from Parkland, and those have provided us with a framework,” Wall says. “We are always looking for ways to improve, and everyone here is continuing to do the best we can.”

“Sadly, this is not unique; it’s just very different.”

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