Being More Than the Violence Around Us

This is my experience as a person trying to make sense of drunk driving and mass shootings. This is my reflection as a teacher at a public school in Las Vegas, trying to get to know and value my students, to create a community where they are safe, and where we can all become more than the violence around us.

Thursday

September 28, 2017

My physics students[1] were drawing diagrams to show how increasing molecular mass increases density. Outside, paramedics and police officers were staging a crash scene of a head-on collision between a truck and a car. This was for a two-day program called “Every 15 Minutes,” where a few students were chosen to act as a drunk driver and victims while the rest of our students sat in bleachers and watched as the police and paramedics responded. Most participating students were taken away in ambulances or helicopters. One student was zipped into a

body bag, and her parents met the coroner at the crash scene. The next day, students attended the memorial for the student who “died” the first day.

I told my students right before the program, “My dad was an alcoholic. When I was in eighth grade, my dad tried to drive home drunk and collided with another car, killing two men and injuring a third. Right now I feel like puking or crying, or both. I don’t think I can handle being there. If any of you need to talk, come find me.”

While I waited for students to return, I grew nervous. I planned to share my family’s story with each class period. I hoped I could share our story with honesty while also keeping my family’s dignity. I hope I could do this without breaking down in front of my students.

Soon, my students came back in. Most looked somber.

High school can be tough and lonely. Please know that I care about you. And if you ever want to talk, I’d be happy to.

Some were crying and wanted hugs. We told each other we loved each other, which surprised me. I asked my students to hold up the number of fingers to show how they’re doing. Five fingers is amazing, three is okay, one is terrible. A lot of their hands had one or two fingers. Some kids don’t bother holding up any fingers. I call them gently by name: “Aimee, how are you doing?”; two fingers. “Bryan, how are you feeling?”; one finger. “Gabe, how are you?”; three fingers. We did this at the start of each period that day.

Then I told them that, before we started on physics, I wanted to share my own experience with them. I took a deep breath and began. “When I was in eighth grade, I answered the phone at home and it was the police. My dad had been in a car accident, and he’d broken his leg, but he was alive. My dad had gone to a bar and then tried to drive home, hit another car head-on, killed two men and caused a third to be paralyzed.”

I paused to look at my students’ faces. Then, I told them everything: what it was like to not have money at home and to be afraid we couldn’t stay together as a family. I talked about my dad’s trial, hearing from victims’ families, and then

watching him handcuffed and taken away. I talked about people in our community, who made sure we kids had rides to sports practice, food, funding for school trips, and people with whom we could talk. I was proud of my mom, for holding our family together. I was proud of my dad for using his time in prison to help other inmates get their GED credential, play piano at all the prison church services, and volunteer to support mentally ill prisoners. I choked up when I told them about how when my dad was released, our neighbors had decorated the 20 miles of highway with signs welcoming him home. I told them how lucky I am to have my dad and to be able to visit him, when the family members of the two men who died will never see their loved ones again.

"I told you all this for a few reasons. I know a lot of you have already tried alcohol and maybe even other substances. I want to ask you to be careful. Know how easily people can come to rely on them. Know how it can lead you to make choices that destroy others' lives. Don't be so proud that you can't ask for help. Be brave; confront your friends if it's hurting their lives. Also, be careful as you start to drive. It's easy to be distracted. You want to just look at that one text, change the song that's playing, look up directions. But it can always wait until you get there."

"Lastly, I wanted to share that with you because I don't know you that well. But you could all be dealing with something similar. We're all dealing with different things in our lives. High school can be tough and lonely. Please know that I care about you. And if you ever want to talk, I'd be happy to."

I paused. My students were all looking at me. Or they were looking at their hands. Or at each other. Or at anywhere but each other.

"Does anyone have any questions or anything they want to share?"

I waited.

Students shifted. Their eyes focused in front of themselves. Someone raised their hand.

Each class of students responded differently. In one period, my students said, "Thank you for sharing your story." They were ready to move on, so we observed a convection cell of water dyed red for hot and blue for cold, remarking on how the dyed water swirled around and around until it became purple.

In another class period, some students asked me questions: “Do you drink alcohol?” and “Why do you teach?” I answered honestly. Heather asked, “What did you tell people when they asked you where your dad was? Or what your dad does for work?”

I said, “That’s tricky, right? It depends on the situation. Sometimes, you don’t want to go into it with a stranger. So you tell them that your dad teaches, since it’s partly true. Or you don’t mention your dad, but then it’s weird, it’s like you’re acting like he died.” Heather nodded.

Then Camille raised her hand. I nodded. She said her mom was an alcoholic too. When Camille was 13, she and her sister had found their mom dead in her bedroom, with a bottle of scotch still in her hand. Her mom had drank herself to death. Wayne said he was in a car accident caused by a drunk driver and his brother died. David shared that his sister was so far gone with alcohol and drugs that he only saw her twice a year now and can’t even relate to her anymore. He spent the rest of the period clenching and unclenching his jaw.

The pauses between stories grew shorter. Another student said, “Well, as long as we’re all sharing,” and then told us his story. One by one, students shared, and everyone listened. Some students asked how people could be so awful or stupid to think they could drive drunk. “You drink to go numb,” April said. “You drink to make your whole body numb. How could you think you could drive when you’re numb?” Camille responded, “When my mom was drinking herself to death, she wasn’t thinking about how she was going to die. Or maybe she wanted to die. But she wasn’t thinking about us.”

The bell rang, and I said, “Thank you. Thank you for listening to me and for sharing your stories.”

My students all moved out, except for Heather. She is the student who challenges me more than any other student. She came up and said, “When people ask about my mom, I say she must be a magician, because she disappeared when I was two. I make it a joke. I show people I can laugh about it.” She looked at me. “I’m not looking for pity. I just want you to know.”

I didn’t want to see my students

only through the trauma they had survived.

I nodded and said, “It’s one of those things where you aren’t sure you’d wish this awful thing on anyone, but you’re not sure if, given the opportunity, you’d take it back. Because at this point, it’s shaped who you are. And you’re proud of who you are.”

“Yeah,” she said.

I followed up with students after school and the next day, to thank them for sharing. David told me, “Yeah, well, after everyone else shared, I just felt like I could. I don’t think I’m ever going to forget that period. I think that period will be the most memorable period of my whole school life.”

I hadn’t expected to hear story after story after story. I left school that day feeling overwhelmed by how many students’ lives had been upturned by alcohol and drug abuse, yet I was grateful that students had created a space for each other where each student wanted to share. I remembered when I was a teenager, choosing who I would trust with my story and when—choosing over and over again when to come out with a part of my identity. I hoped that, moving forward, we could give each other empathy and we could see these stories as part, but not all, of who are becoming.

Monday

October 2, 2017

I woke up to texts and emails about the mass shooting in Las Vegas. It didn’t make sense. In my mind, mass shootings happen in schools, and yesterday was Sunday. I looked up the news and found the shooting had happened at the Route 91 Harvest Festival. This was only a few miles from my school. Some of my students had talked about going. I felt sick to my stomach.

By the time I got to school, I was crying. The first person I ran into was Melanie, my student from last year. Melanie looked at my wet face and asked “Ms. Glaser, do you need a hug?” I nodded.

My first period students started coming in. Every single one that came through

the door, I was so glad to see them. Who was absent? Why were they absent? Eddy was worried about Danno. “I keep texting him. He’s not responding. Why isn’t he responding?”

“I don’t know, Eddy. I’ll call his parents after class.”

In every class we checked in, holding up our fingers. My students were all over the map. Some held up fists; terrible, and buried their faces in their arms. A couple students held up four fingers; it was a good day for them.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “I’m really glad to see you today. I am so glad you came to school today and that I get to see you. We’re all still learning about the shooting and we’re all affected in different ways. However you are feeling, it’s okay. I want you to do whatever you need to do today. If you want to see a counselor, let me know. If you need to make a phone call or leave class for a bit, let me know before you go. You can zone out, listen to music, draw pictures, or text friends. I won’t take your phone.” Some students laugh, since I’m notorious for taking phones if students aren’t using them for classwork. “Some of you may just want a normal day. Some of you just want to write about how the density of saltwater affected your ice cubes. Sometimes, moving on is a way of showing that these events that are meant to terrorize us don’t have power over our lives. So, we’re going to have a normal class today, for those of you who want that. But if you need something different, do what works for you.”

My students filled two cups with water and then stirred salt into one. I dropped the ice cubes in dyed blue water. We watched, as the dye in the freshwater cup swirled downwards and eddied in the bottom of the cup. In the saltwater cup, the dye slid upwards, along the edge of the ice cube, collecting at the surface. Many students started creating a final diagram to show how density, temperature, and convection cells explained the ice cubes’ different melting times.

I came around to each desk. I squatted. I looked at Muhammad. “Muhammad, are your friends and family okay?”

“Two of my friends are dead. My family is okay.” His colored pencil kept circling around and around, showing the movement of the dye.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head.
“Do you want to stay here or go see your counselor?”
“I want to be here.”
“I’m glad you’re here,” I squeezed his arm.
I checked in with each student. Most of my students told me they were mostly fine; none of their friends and family had been directly hurt or killed, at least not that they knew of yet.
We looked at the ice cubes. “Where does the dye go in each one?” “Why?” “Was this a convection cell?” “What would a convection cell look like if we saw it?”
Cara hunched up in her hoodie. She was trembling and drawing the saddest stick figures. Stick figures that were hunched over, crumpled up in balls, drowning in red clouds.
I knelt next to her desk. “Cara, what’s going on?”
“My friend is missing. No one knows where she is.”
“Was she at the Harvest 91 Festival?”
She gulped and nodded.
“Do you want to talk about it? Or go see a counselor?”
She shook her head. “I want to stay.”
We watched the ice cube in the freshwater quickly disappearing.
“That one is the convection cell,” Cara said.
“How do you know?” I asked.
“It’s like what we saw on Friday. Where the red and blue dye mix up and turn purple.”
I nodded. “How can you show that in your diagram?”
Cara started drawing cups of water and adding in arrows.
When the bell rang, I said, “Cara, let me know, okay? Let me know what you hear.” She smiled weakly.
“Muhammad, if you need space, you can come hang out anytime during the day.”
Muhammad nodded.
My first period students moved out. My second period students moved in. I started class again. I sat on the lab table at the front of the room. I took a deep

breath. “I’m really glad to see you today. I was worried about you . . . ” We checked in on our fingers. More fists, but some kids were doing fine. I repeated this in every class.

After each period, I wrote down who had lost someone or who seemed especially troubled. I needed to remember whom out of my 108 students I should check in with tomorrow. It was too important to forget.

At the end of the school day, I looked at my sheet of absences. Then I started calling all the parents and guardians of students who had been absent.

Danno Masan’s dad answered the phone. “He’s okay. He’s here. I just . . . I just . . . ” Mr. Masan starting choking up. “You see, I was in New York, in 2001. And it was just too close to home. It was like 9/11. And I really needed him home.” He was crying. “I really care about him. I just love him so much. And I needed him home.”

I was crying too. “I’m glad he’s home with you. I care about him too. I’m so glad he’s home with you.”

Mr. Masan started to apologize.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay to want him home.”

“He’ll be at school tomorrow,” he said.

Leaving messages was the hardest. What do I say when I don’t know why they were absent? I tried not to imagine the worst.

When I called Jenna’s mom, she must have needed someone with whom to talk. She and Jenna were at the Route 91 Festival. Jenna was okay. They were both alive. No bullets had hit them, but the bullets came from everywhere, and they were running, slipping over blood, trying to get over barriers, running into the hotel, being locked up for their own safety, getting home at 4 am, not sleeping. Other friends ran to the Bellagio and hid in the janitor’s closet with some employees, but then there were reports that there were shots at the Bellagio. I pressed the phone harder and harder to my face as I listened. At the end, Jenna’s mom took a deep breath, “She’ll be in school tomorrow.”

Clubs and tutoring were canceled after school.

I went home and cried. Then my husband and I went on a run in the dark, with

only the moon lighting the trails. I stood on a ridge in the faint moonlight, looking out over the lights of Las Vegas. I imagined my students and all the other people, in their homes throughout the valley. I thought of the tourists who had been displaced to new hotel rooms, visitors staying in community centers since they didn't have a hotel room, people anxiously waiting overnight in hospital rooms and coroner's offices. I thought of the marathon in Boston, the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, and the hashtag #VegasStrong that was sure to arise from today. I wished that there were no more tragedies, no more #CityStrong hashtags.

The next day, and the following day

October 3–4, 2017

My absent students came back. I checked in with all my students who were worried about friends or family and my students who had lost friends or family. While we worked, students hashed out details of the shooting. I wanted them to have time to process, but I worried about the kids who sat in their groups stone-faced, who maybe didn't want to hear all the details again. It was hard to listen to my students normalize the mass shootings that filled the news. My student who had been there and escaped alive was especially busy drawing her diagram. I checked in briefly but didn't press. I didn't want to make her have to explain to one more person what she went through and how she was doing.

I had an online hangout with other teachers from across the country who are in my inquiry group. We were supposed to be talking about our research question and figuring out how to collect data. I broke down in tears. I had so many questions about the world, humanity, and teaching. Nothing made sense.

"How do we make it better?" my friends and family asked. I felt anger and despair. We don't make something like this better. It's terrible, and you can't just make it better. But at the same time, I wanted to have something to laugh about and a reason to live on. I wanted the same for my students. I stayed up late looking for goofy science cartoons to share with them.

Our student clubs began a donation drive to replenish supplies that community centers had used hosting people displaced by the shooting. Our school events

became fundraisers to help victims pay for medical costs and for victims' families to pay for funeral bills.

Then two days had passed since the shooting, and it was Wednesday. My students practiced, discussed, and compared how to use models to explain energy transformation and transfer. My students described how their understanding of density had changed and decided what they wanted to focus on tomorrow.

When class was over, I realized I had forgotten to check in with my students who had lost people. I needed to check on them tomorrow. Or should I? How many days in a row should I follow up with them? What if they didn't want to be reminded?

After school, Charlotte came to my classroom crying. I asked her, "Did you lose someone in the shooting?" Charlotte said, "No, I'm crying because I had surgery on my shoulder because of volleyball and I missed a week of school, and my grades are horrible, and I'm overwhelmed. And now I feel selfish for crying about my grades, when there are bigger issues." We laughed. I gave her a hug and said, "It's okay to worry and cry about your grades. That should be your biggest worry."

Our "Every Fifteen Minutes" program happened on Thursday and Friday. Then the shooting happened on Sunday night, and it felt like we couldn't escape the violence. The tears, hugs, and heartfelt conversations continued. It seemed as if every person was on the verge of melting down, and yet we were all trying to prove to each other that Las Vegas is a beautiful place and that this life is worth living. We wanted to be there for each other and make sense of it together, but we also wanted to have a life beyond the shooting.

In those few days, I got to know my students more deeply than I had in the previous weeks. But I didn't want to see my students only through the trauma they had survived. In the following weeks, my students returned to being goofier and more light-hearted. How my students had responded to trauma became only one part of their identities. After sharing so deeply with each other, it was easier for students to use class time to talk about how they were dealing with racial

tensions, pressure to try alcohol and drugs, busy schedules, family strife, mental health, and other issues, as well as to celebrate getting their first job, getting a driver's license, and being courageous enough to ask their crush to a dance.

I try to keep this promise to myself: Every school day, I will do my best to love my students. I'll do my best to show that I care for them by letting them be silent when they need to be and listening to them when they want to share. I'll do my best to make our classroom a place where we want to be, on good days and on bad days. I'll do my best to teach them science. We'll ask questions and seek to answer them. We will leave most of our questions unanswered. In science and in life, we don't ever prove anything completely. There's always room for more wondering. I'll tell my students their process can be even more important than their answers. In the process, we will share with each other how beautiful, complex, painful, ridiculous, and worthwhile this world can be.

Footnote

[1] Students' names, as well as identifying details, have been changed.

Download Article

Jolie Glaser, a 2014 Knowles Fellow, teaches physics and environmental science to students in Las Vegas, Nevada. She also advises an Outdoor Exploration Club, so that students and teachers can goof around outside and get to know their home, and started her school's Open Door Club, where teachers visit each other's classrooms. Reach Jolie at jolie.glaser@knowlesteachers.org.