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Feature

Photo Credit: Kyra Parrow

MSD Strong:
Sarah Lerner shares
her story as a gun
violence survivor

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I lost my sense of safety. I lost my sense of innocence. I lost my sense of security. I lost my ability to see the world as I had only hours earlier.

Photo Credit: Kyra Parrow



I would give anything to go back to the way things were before the fire alarm rang. I know that I can't. What I can do is use my voice and work hard for the



Sarah Lerner, an initiate of the Theta Iota Chapter at Florida Atlantic University, is an English and journalism teacher at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. She kept 15 students safe in her classroom on February 14, 2018 while a gunman opened fire at the school, killing 17 people and wounding 14 others.

It is a very odd thing to think of myself as a school shooting survivor. The first time that I acknowledged that I was a survivor was on Oct. 5, 2018. I attended an event as a guest of Everytown for Gun Safety. When I went to the Moms Demand Action table to sign up to be a volunteer, I stared at the questions about how I am connected to gun violence. I stood there for what felt like an hour, until I finally checked the box to indicate that I was a survivor of gun violence. I guess that I never thought of it that way.

The events of **February 14, 2018** changed my life forever. It was a normal day at school. I was giving a quiz to my senior English classes on "1984." I joked that I was ruining their Valentine's Day by giving them the quiz. To make them smile, I put Hershey Kisses on their desks. I posted a picture on social media of my heart leggings and the bag of Hershey Kisses. Twenty minutes before school ended, my world flipped upside down. I left school shattered, broken, lost.

I wasn't in building 12. I didn't see anyone get shot. I never saw the shooter. I just didn't think of myself as a survivor. When I said that to my husband, he told me that I absolutely was. I was on campus. I heard the shots when I got outside. I kept 15 students safe in my classroom for two and a half to three hours, before the SWAT Team entered my room. I might not have seen anything, but I was there and didn't know if I'd be next.

On **February 15**, I did a 12-hour media marathon and attended the vigil at Pine Trails Park.

On **February 16**, I attended the funeral for Meadow Pollack, who I had as a freshman in my English class. That was the first time I cried since leaving school two days earlier.

On **February 17**, I met with my yearbook staff. I told them how much I loved them, and how glad I was that they were safe. I had a number of my staff not only in the building, but also in the impacted classrooms. They watched their friends and classmates die.

They were injured. I reminded them that if it had been the next day, the event would've taken place when we have yearbook. I couldn't wrap my head around how many of them could've been in the building getting quotes, taking pictures, etc. The thought that I could have lost anyone was too much to take. I began to cry. They cried, too. We discussed how we wanted to cover what had happened in the yearbook, even though we didn't really fully understand what would lay ahead for us. No other yearbook has had to document a school shooting before; Columbine happened after the yearbook would've gone to print and Sandy Hook had a kid-friendly yearbook. We knew the weight of what we had to do. We had to completely overhaul the book, and make a yearbook in six weeks - when we usually spend 10 months to make it. We knew that we wanted to honor the victims. We also knew that it had to be perfect and do them justice.

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create a better, safer world for my children.
I lost so much, but we all lost seventeen Eagles

Photo Credit: Kyra Parrow



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On **February 18**, I attended the funeral for Jaime Guttenberg, who was in my Journalism 1 class that year. Beyond that, I don't know what I did on a particular day. I just know that I tried to keep myself busy.

On **February 23**, I went back to school for the first time. I entered my classroom, and it looked like a freeze-frame – like time stood still. The date was still on the board, the quizzes were still on their desks, student phones were still plugged in, the computers were still on. I began to have an anxiety attack and couldn't breathe. I was in the room for a total of five minutes. I had to get out of there.

When school resumed on **February 28**, I hugged each one of my students. I told them that I would always be there for them. Within the next few weeks, my students started opening up about where they were and what they experienced. I never prompted them. I always listened. It broke my heart that children – because that's what they are – experienced something so awful, so traumatic, so life-changing.

I was approached in April about working on a book with Random House. It was to be an anthology of student writing, artwork, photography related to the event. I was so flattered that they thought of me, and immediately said yes to the opportunity. For the next four months, I collected all of the pieces that would go to print. I edited them, worked as a go-between with the publisher and contributors; I also wrote two pieces myself. My summer job (on top of my actual summer job) was to make this book. I read every word of what was written. It was so much to take in, that I'm glad I got pieces in installments. It was so raw, so real, so honest, and so sad. The book would become "Parkland Speaks," and was released on January 22, 2019. Working on "Parkland Speaks" was such a wonderful experience for me. I have always

wanted to write a book, but this was so much more than *just* a book. It was a time capsule, much like the yearbook I made, of what happened to us, how it impacted us, how we're working through it, and how we're working to make change. I wanted the world to hear our stories. I wanted them to see how we're fighting back.

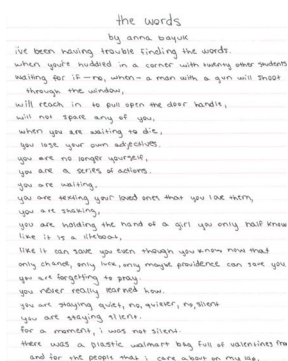
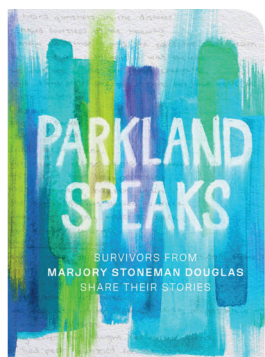
In my piece, "ReWrite," I wrote how proud I was of the students who trusted me with their work. The book includes artwork, photography, journal entries, Congressional testimony, first-hand accounts from some who were in the building, as well as poetry and prose. It's brave to show anyone your writing – something with which you feel so intimately connected. It's even braver to have it published for the world to see. As I wrote, "It's raw. It's real. It happened to them."

In my piece "February 14, 2018," I recalled my experience from the day. I wanted to show how normal the day was, and how abnormal and unimaginably horrible it would become. I wrote,

"I lost my sense of safety. I lost my sense of innocence. I lost my sense of security. I lost my ability to see the world as I had only hours earlier. I would give anything to go back to the way things were before the fire alarm rang. I know that I can't. What I can do is use my voice and work hard for the rest of my life to make change – change that will create a better, safer world for my children.

I lost so much, but we all lost seventeen Eagles that day. They now fly high above us, protecting us, encouraging us to make this world a better place. We work hard for them. We are positive. We are passionate. We are proud to be Eagles. We are MSD Strong."

I had a number of my journalism students contribute to "Parkland Speaks." It was important to me to offer them a way to use their voice. Not all of the students are as outspoken as those who've dominated the media, and that's fine. Some want to express themselves in different ways. I wanted to give them that chance.



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Over the past year, I have been given many opportunities to use my voice, travel and work as an activist. I went to Washington, D.C. in June 2018 to speak at The National Archives as a guest of the Former Members of Congress Association. I am a founding member and teacher adviser for the Student Gun Violence Summit which took place in Washington, DC in October 2018. I have been on MSNBC, CNN, Good Morning, Britain, HLN, in *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, as well as other media outlets. I will continue to speak up and speak out until there's no one left to listen.

Over the past year, I have worked very hard on self-care. I get massages when I can, and get my nails done biweekly. I see my psychologist weekly. I was diagnosed with PTSD and have a long road ahead of me. As I tell my students, it's ok to not be ok. It's not ok to not be ok, and then not do anything about it. Speak up. Ask for help. Talk to someone. Mental health is so critically important for everyone, not just those of us who have been through trauma.



I spent most of 2018 planning my son's Bar Mitzvah, which was January 19, 2019. What would've stressed me out in a different point in life, was actually a nice diversion from the stress that

permeated every other second of my life. It was nice to make sure he felt special, and not focus so much on me. Perhaps this was my way of putting off the inevitable feelings I knew I'd have as 2/14 drew closer, but I was ok with that.

Moving forward, I plan to take it one day at a time. That's really all I can do. I met Abbey Clements

in October 2018. She was a teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2014. She was there the day that 26 people, including 20 students, were murdered. She and I became very fast friends. She has since become a huge source of support and inspiration. I've called her to vent and cry. I text her to make sure that what I'm going through is normal – even though it's abnormal to me. She assures me that things will be ok, and I believe her.

I have wonderful and supportive friends who check on me and make sure I'm ok. I have loving parents who live close by and help me with whatever I need. I have a brother, who is the most wonderful human being I know. I have two children who have been and continue to be impacted by what happened to their mom and their community. I have the world's best husband who allows me to be who I am, speak my mind, travel and be the outspoken woman he fell in love with in 2002.

More than anything else, I am forever changed by what happened at my school. I'm still Sarah, but I'm now Sarah 2.0. I'm not quite sure what that means yet, but I'm working to figure it out. I am a mom. I am a wife. I am a daughter. I am a sister. I am a niece. I am a cousin. I am a friend. I am a teacher. I am an adviser. I am a mentor. I am a survivor. I am a victim. I am a hero.

I was recognized with the 2019 Woman of Distinction Award from Alpha Xi Delta. I was so honored to be able to be there in person to receive my award, as well as meet Sisters and address the National Convention attendees.

The 2019-2020 school year will be my eighteenth year of teaching, and my sixth year at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. I love my school. I love my community. I love my job. I am positive. I am passionate. I am proud to be an Eagle.

Sarah started a blog to document her life, post-2/14. You can read it at www.lifelonglearner.com and follow her on Twitter at [@mrs_lerner](https://twitter.com/mrs_lerner).

"Parkland Speaks," published by Random House, is available online and wherever books are sold.