



Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma  
Advancing Science, Fostering Relationships, and Building Careers

**2024 Oriens Resident Winning Essay**  
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On the morning of December 14, 2012, the ticking clock was the only distraction while studying for my last exam in the college library. That was until my phone started rumbling. The constant, insistent, loud vibration on the wooden desk clearly irritated fellow classmates studying at nearby tables. My phone continued its tap-dancing until I could not ignore it. Finally, I picked it up. "There's a reported shooting in Sandy Hook, at one of the schools." Initially I assumed it was a mistake, a drill. I ran searches for Sandy Hook on my computer. All I could find were reports about a shooting at one of the schools, with a potential shooter at large. Immediately, my stomach became unsettled, my chest was on fire, I clenched my jaw, and I began to shake as the gravity of what might be happening sunk in. I called my mother. She was in the neighboring town running errands. I told her not to go home, because we lived two miles from Sandy Hook Elementary.

The news paralyzed me. My ability to study was gone, I walked back to my dorm and watched the news. Varying accounts of the story were spreading, and it became apparent there were more than a few people hurt. I had no idea if my friend's younger sibling who went to the school or my friend's parent who was a teacher there were dead; I was afraid to text them. Eventually, in the evening I laid down in bed, knowing sleep would not come. The next morning, I turned on the TV. Pictures of the dead children and teachers invaded the screen. I knew one of the teachers. I went to high school with the killer. Fortunately, my friend's mom and my friend's brother were uninjured. However, I felt severe guilt knowing all these kids and teachers had families who loved them. I took my final in evolutionary biology and when I read questions about inheritance patterns, the shooter's face kept assaulting my mind. When I finished, I did not make it home. I found a stairwell and cried for my hometown. Later that day, I packed and headed home to Sandy Hook.

There was so much traffic cramming through the town center; there were news trucks and cameras everywhere. They were out of place in our picturesque town center with its yearly Christmas tree. Typically, our town looked like a Hallmark movie, but sadly, now the Christmas tree had pictures of the children, old Newtown High School Letterman's jackets, and teddy bears. There were people with candles, people passing out prayer books. I hugged my mother when I got home.

The next several weeks were a blur. Parents and families around the country prepared for another Christmas. In Newtown and Sandy Hook, we mourned our dead. It could have been a typical day in a small snowy town in New England, but Anderson Cooper was presenting live for CNN next to me. All of us in Newtown filled our time with each other, making meals for the twenty-six families and raising money for them. We said prayers, held vigils, and watched as the hearses rolled through the town, each one with a small coffin in the back. For years I had night terrors about the event. In one nightmare, I imagined myself walking through the shattered glass front door, hiding from the shooter in the library, and tackling the shooter in another.

As a surgeon, I'm reminded of those children, and how now my perspective is in the trauma bay and in the operating room rather than in my community. One day, a three-year-old came into the trauma bay when a stray bullet penetrated his arm and thorax. His mother was in the room, crying. She begged us to save him. We failed; horribly. We struggled to get access and to intubate him. We lost pulses and did a resuscitative thoracotomy. I can still hear his cries on the stretcher when he arrived, and I remember the silence when his cries stopped. I moved on to do a resuscitative thoracotomy on a sixteen-year-old shot in retaliation; he died too, while the mother of the little boy in the Emergency Department was left to struggle with her bottomless pit of grief at the loss of her child.

Two years later a twelve-year-old was an innocent bystander, shot in the head and abdomen during a drive-by shooting. We intubated, got access, and got her to the operating room, unfortunately, she too died. I was in the center of these children's trauma and their families' grief. It felt like the notable events happened before and after their time in the trauma bay and OR. With these kids, the bullet came before me. The families and communities mourning would come after me. It was the same with the Sandy Hook kids but I was just in a different part of the story touched by the ripples of the children's trauma, just like everyone else.

On the day the children in Sandy Hook died, in one classroom, the kids wrote what they wanted to learn on their classroom board. They wanted to learn to tie their shoes. They wanted to learn how to read chapter books. They wanted to learn how to count numbers. These children continue to have a profound effect on me: they made me realize I want to learn how to save lives. I decided to be a trauma surgeon so I could stand in the center of these horrible events – after the bullets and before the grief, to do my best to stop the ripples before they spread. I know I will not always be successful, but I cannot imagine a life where I don't try. It is a privilege to feel the successes, but as much as it hurts, it is also a privilege to feel the failures, and learn from them. The unfinished dreams on a chalkboard written by the Sandy Hook kids remind me to keep working hard to pursue mine.