

COMMENTARY

A Sandy Hook Parent's Letter to Teachers

By Nelba Marquez-Greene

As another school year begins and old routines settle back into place, I wanted to share my story in honor of the teachers everywhere who care for our children.

I lost my 6-year-old daughter Ana Grace on Dec. 14, 2012, in the rampage at Sandy Hook Elementary School. My son, who was in the building and heard the shooting, survived.

While waiting in the firehouse that day to hear the official news that our daughter was dead, my husband and I made promises to ourselves, to each other, and to our son. We promised to face the future with courage, faith, and love.

As teachers and school employees begin this new year, my wish for you is that same courage, faith, and love.

It takes guts to be a teacher. Six brave women gave their lives trying to protect their students at Sandy Hook. Other teachers were forced to run from the building, stepping over the bodies of their friends and colleagues, and they came right back to work.



Nelba Marquez-Greene's 6-year-old daughter Ana Grace, who was killed in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary on Dec. 14, 2012.

—Courtesy of Nelba Marquez-Greene

When I asked my son's teacher why she returned, she responded, "Because they are my kids. And my students need me now more than ever." She sent daily updates on my son's progress, from his behavior to what he'd eaten for lunch. And four months later, when my son finally smiled one day after school, I asked him about it. His response? "Mom. My teacher is so funny. I had an epic day."

While I pray you will never find yourself in the position of the teachers at Sandy Hook, your courage will support students like my son, who have lived through traumas no child should have to.

Your courage will support students who are left out and overlooked, like the isolated young man who killed my daughter. At some point he was a young, impressionable student, often sitting all alone at school. You will have kids facing long odds for whom your smile, your encouraging word, and your willingness to go the extra mile will provide the comfort and security they need to try again tomorrow.

When you Google "hero," there should be a picture of a principal, a school lunch worker, a custodian, a reading specialist, a teacher, or a bus monitor. Real heroes don't wear capes. They work in America's schools.

"When I asked my son's teacher why she returned, she responded, 'Because they are my kids.' "

Being courageous requires faith. It took faith to go back to work at Sandy Hook after the shooting. Nobody had the answers or knew what would come tomorrow, but they just kept going. Every opportunity you have to create welcoming environments in our schools where parents and students feel connected counts.

Have faith that your hard work is having a profound impact on your students. Of the 15,000 personal letters I received after the shooting, only one stays at my bedside. It's from my high school English teacher, Robert Buckley.

But you can't be courageous or step out on faith without a deep love for what you do.

Parents are sending their precious children to you this fall. Some will come fully prepared, and others not. They will come fed and with empty bellies. They will come from intact homes and fractured ones. Love them all.

When my son returned to school in January, I thought I was going to lose my mind. Imagine the difficulty in sending your surviving child into a classroom when you lost your baby in a school shooting. We sent him because we didn't want him to be afraid.

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We sent him because we wanted him to understand that while our lives would never be the same, our lives still needed to move forward.

According to the 2011-12 National Survey of Children's Health, nearly half of America's children will have suffered at least one childhood trauma before the age of 18. They need your love.

A few weeks before the shooting, Ana Grace and I shared a special morning. Lunches were packed and clothes were picked out the night before, so we had extra time to snuggle. And while I lay in bed with my beautiful caramel princess, she sensed that I was distracted and asked, "What's the matter, Mom?" I remember saying to her, "Nothing, baby. It's just work." She looked at me for a very long time with a thoughtful stare, then she told me, "Don't let them suck your fun circuits dry, Mom."

As you begin this school year, remember Ana Grace. Walk with courage, with faith, and with love. And don't let them suck your fun circuits dry.

Nelba Marquez-Greene is a marriage and family therapist and the mental-health and relational-wellness director for Sandy Hook Promise, a nonprofit organization that supports those affected by the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., and advocates policy changes related to gun violence. Ms. Marquez-Greene's 6-year-old daughter, Ana Grace, was killed in the Sandy Hook shooting in December 2012.