

Senior Essay
Second Place
Wyatt Key
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An All Too Real Fear

Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, “It takes something more than intelligence to act intelligently.” However, as I sat curled into a ball in my middle school administrator’s office, I didn’t feel intelligent. I felt alone, and I felt fear. Not the type of fear that’s immediate, and passes over you as quickly as it comes, but instead the type of fear that wells up inside of you like a tsunami, ready to burst out of your chest and unleash a world of indescribable terror never felt before. Previously, I had spoken to some friends over the internet and asked how their day was going. The topic of crushes came up and everyone was eager to share. I happened to bring up a crush on a boy. What I was met with was hatred and wrath, spewing from the mouth of somebody who I considered a potential friend. I think that was the first time I was called a slur, among other things. Of course I had heard it before, being passed around in locker rooms, or shouted in the hallways; but I never expected that word to be directed towards me.

Hearing it for the first time, my body froze in anger, before a feeling of deep and internal sadness took its place. My mind raced. “Why would someone hate me for something I can’t control?” As quickly as the thought arrived, an answer followed: “That’s just how it’s always been.” That wasn’t a satisfying conclusion for me. I wanted to make him understand how I felt. So I discussed it with a trusted friend. He told me that the student had made numerous comments about shooting up our school. He would say it as casually as someone greeting family. When my friend provided evidence for these claims, I knew we had to take action. It took about a week to compile over 60 images showcasing violent, homophobic, and racist behavior. We wanted to be sure we had irrefutable proof that this student could potentially be a danger to our school. Our lack of immediate action may alarm some, however we wanted to make sure that our beliefs

were right, and previous interactions with counselors had proven that accusations without evidence would be met with inaction, or even scorn. Case in point, a friend telling a counselor that she was a lesbian, and having a similar experience as I did. Her parents were violently homophobic, and she wasn't sure what reaction they would have if they knew. The counselors assured her that everything would be fine. When she got home, the counselors had notified her parents of everything. I don't know where that friend is now. I haven't seen her since then. This is not unheard of. One in seven LGBTQ people avoid seeking help for fear that they will be discriminated against. There's never a more helpless feeling than being ignored by those who are meant to help you, the people adults tell you that you can talk to when something is wrong. So when the day finally arrived to drop the attention slip alarming the counselors of our issue into the big box, I froze. Did I really want to potentially ruin someone's life? Would they even believe me? The worst part was, as I pondered what I was going to do, sitting idle in front of the office, we locked eyes as he passed through the hall. I got a text from him. "We're cool right?" it read, splashed across my iPhone. I quickly placed the slip in the box and walked to my first class in silence.

Finally, after what seemed like hours ticking by in slow motion, the time came to speak to the counselor, and the aforementioned feeling of fear returned. I think the thing I remember best was how hot the room was. That's always the thing everyone's puzzled about. They expect me to recall a feeling, or words that were spoken, but all I truly remember was the counselor's UVA bobblehead, and the warmth of the office. I was alone, and placed upon me was the weight that at any given moment, a shot could be fired, and I would have failed. These aren't rational thoughts. They're the thoughts of a child placed in a situation that's far too familiar, and far too real, for some to admit.

The counselor was helpful, very helpful in fact. For once, someone who was able

to really do something had listened! She told me everything would be okay, and even as I sat glued to the chair, frightened for my life, I started to believe it. I gave her the photos, and left. I didn't see him for three months. The school had suspended him, and taken him to court, but they had also told him to receive help, and appointed him a therapist. Life was blissful for a while, until about 2 months into his suspension, when I was once again called into that dreadful office. It was the end of the school day, and buses had begun to leave. The administrators asked me if I would feel safe if he returned, or if he had contacted me during his suspension. I was more worried about missing the bus. I wouldn't have a ride home, and my mom would have to leave work to come pick me up. Looking back on it now, one has to wonder if this was planned. A rushed meeting meant to achieve the most satisfactory answer possible. Leaving the school was surreal. An empty lot, save for only my bus, and a group of fifty dissatisfied children. I was attacked with a barrage of questions, but by that point, I didn't want to answer any more. I put my headphones in, and quietly stared out the window on the long ride home.

His return was anticlimactic. It was like he was a different person. He apologized to me, and not knowing what to do, I accepted it. He was nicer, more friendly. He avoided me, but that was to be expected. I think he felt bad for the things he said, truly and genuinely. Even though the journey was rough, I still stand by what I did. School shooters often make direct threats at people, or the school itself. What matters is being able to notice the signs. Through one simple action I may have stopped a tragedy from occurring. What matters is knowing when to say something, and knowing when to ask for help. This was a matter bigger than I could ever fathom. Without my amazing support group, I would've buckled under the pressure. Know when a problem is bigger than something that can be handled alone.

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