

Our Schools Are Still at Risk – What Can We Do?

Tony Montalto





Gina Rose Montalto

Gina Montalto, my 14-year-old daughter, was kindhearted, bubbly, and a straight-A student. She was a freshman and one of the 17 wonderful souls murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on Valentine's Day 2018. Her classmates who survived were galvanized by the six-minute massacre, and so were the families of the victims. We formed [Stand With Parkland – The National Association of Families for Safe Schools](#) to bring people together and be a voice for all our nation's families seeking positive change.

As our nation's schools struggle to find solutions to promote effective learning in the COVID-19 era, they must not forget about the dangers of targeted violence in schools. While many districts have not returned to campus for full-time, in-person learning, parents and school staff should be aware that studies show an increased risk of targeted

attacks following breaks in attendance. This was highlighted in the 2019 report [Protecting America's Schools](#) from the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC).

Stand with Parkland partnered with NTAC as we toured the nation in late 2019 to educate nearly 5,000 school, law enforcement, and mental health professionals about the importance of behavioral threat assessments. Being proactive is critical to protecting our children and staff members. It is important to realize that the purpose of this process is to recognize students who need help before they resort to violence. It is not to punish or incarcerate students. An effective multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment team should consist of school officials, law enforcement, and mental health professionals. Independent research from the University of Virginia shows that multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment



Stand with Parkland President Tony Montalto at a U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center event in Chicago, November 2019.

**NEVER
AGAIN**



ParklandSTRONG

LOVE



**# DOUGLAS
STRONG**

Yes fly
not always
bro





Montalto family meet and greet with President Obama in October 2018.

teams reduce suspensions and help ensure the equitable treatment of all students (Cornell, 2018).

Some may ask “Why are behavioral threat assessments so important?” I speak from personal experience. The vice principal who was assigned to perform the threat assessment on the shooter in the Parkland massacre was unfamiliar with the process and botched it. Gina’s killer was known as an angry, violent, and dangerous person to the school, the Sheriff’s office, a local mental health agency, and even the FBI. Sadly, these groups failed to connect the dots. They never came together to share their information and effectively manage the threat. Had an effective multidisciplinary threat assessment been properly conducted the full extent of the danger would have been realized. Our community would not be shattered, and my family would be whole instead of forever broken. This is why our founding families helped pass the STOP School Violence Act in spring 2018. Among other things, this act provides funding for and recommends the use of threat assessment teams.

Safety is everyone’s responsibility and schools and the community-at-large must find a way to effectively communicate information regarding threats to our schools. This includes notifying parents about known threats and safety concerns. Families must be involved to make sure schools have adequate safety plans for their children. Stand with Parkland has developed [a series of five questions](#) to help families begin the conversation around school safety. The answers you should expect to hear are provided free of charge once you join Stand with Parkland.

The high school where my daughter was murdered was “A” rated, so I thought it was safe. The principal even told us at freshman orientation, “Don’t worry, we will keep your babies safe.” The reality of the situation was quite different, as was uncovered by the [Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission’s investigation](#) into the shooting. Many failures occurred prior to and on that terrible February day. Parents must dig beneath the veneer and make sure policies and procedures are in place to keep their children safe.



Stand with Parkland at the White House for the launch of SchoolSafety.gov in February 2020.

House Photo by Shealah Craighead

The threats to schools are real. The consequences of not protecting our nation's children and educators are devastating to families and communities alike.

Stand with Parkland believes we need School Resource Officers (SROs) on our nation's campuses. SRO programs are effective at building relationships that make students and teachers feel safe and improve the climate and culture in schools. SROs also collaborate with school officials to get students the help they need. According to U.S. Department of Justice data, this has contributed to a 74% decline in juvenile arrests between 1996 and 2018 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). We know

seconds count in critical situations, and the 2019 NTAC report shows "No attacks were ended by outside law enforcement agencies responding to the scene from off-campus" (U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, 2019, p.12). Each community must make its own decisions on where to put their resources, and these decisions should be based on fact, not emotion. To facilitate that, we created a SRO Working Group to gather information and create a [resource page](#) so that facts, research, and anecdotes regarding SROs can be accessed in one place. SROs bridge the gap between law enforcement and communities by becoming part of the school safety network, mentoring students, and providing a last line of

defense should the unthinkable happen. Parents, teachers, students, and administrators need to understand the depth of services that SROs add to the school community.

Finally, I want to draw your attention to the new federal clearinghouse of best practices for school safety, which can be accessed through [SchoolSafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov). It was time to put politics aside as President Trump used the power of his office to bring together the U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security to focus on the safety of America's students and teachers in school. This is a one-stop shop for anyone charged with the safety of our nation's schools. We encourage parents and school professionals alike to visit the website.

The clearinghouse was the brainchild of one of Stand with Parkland's founding members, Max Schachter, and it was included in the [Federal Commission on School Safety Report](#) published in December 2018. In May 2019, Stand with

Parkland began our integral involvement with the clearinghouse's development. Our founding families contributed their depth of talents – including teachers, school administrators, software developers, and others – as we collaborated in initial briefings, follow-on meetings, and beta testing. SchoolSafety.gov was introduced in February 2020, just days prior to the second commemoration of the murder of our loved ones.

Stand with Parkland is focused on issues, answers, and families. We bring people together as we advocate for school safety in a uniquely inclusive, non-partisan, and holistic way that includes securing school campuses, improving mental health screening and support programs, and promoting responsible firearms ownership – because all of those things failed us the day my daughter and the 16 other wonderful souls were killed at their school. We invite you to join Stand with Parkland and let us be your voice as we push for pragmatic solutions to keep America's students, teachers, and staff safe at school.

Works Cited

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Tony Montalto (tony@standwithparkland.org) is a captain for a major airline with over 30 years of experience. He is also the father of 14-year-old Gina Rose Montalto, who was a victim at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018. Tony is President of Stand with Parkland – The National Association of Families for Safe Schools, an advocacy group founded by families who lost a loved one in the Parkland, Florida shooting. In honor of Gina, Tony is President of the Gina Rose Montalto Memorial Foundation, Inc. Tony and his wife, Jennifer, established this foundation to keep Gina's light shining by helping others through scholarships and awards. Tony has been seen on many local news broadcasts for ABC, Fox, NBC, and CBS affiliates. Nationally, he has appeared on CBS, CNN, MSNBC, and CBSN's "Red and Blue." Tony has also published several op-ed pieces featured in The Sun-Sentinel, Newsweek, and The Washington Post.