

March 1, 2018

Dear Students, Colleagues, and Families,

I watched the news last evening about the return of students and staff to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, just two weeks after the horrific February 14<sup>th</sup> massacre of 17 students and adults. I cannot imagine how difficult yesterday was for everyone connected to that school—students ripped apart from the loss of a classmate, teacher, or coach; faculty, staff, and administration grieving for their students and colleagues; and parents faced with the unimaginable challenge of dropping off their children at a school that was the site of such horror just two weeks earlier.

February 14<sup>th</sup> and Parkland will join other dates and locations that will live in infamy:

- *April 20 ~ a high school in Columbine, Colorado*
- *July 20 ~ a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado*
- *November 5 ~ a Baptist Church in Texas*
- *June 12 ~ a nightclub in Orlando*
- *October 1 ~ an outdoor concert in Las Vegas*
- *December 14 ~ an elementary school in Sandyhook, Connecticut*

There are others—too many to list. I have my own violent day of infamy that I want to share with you:

- **March 17, 1997 ~ a high school in Presque Isle, Maine**

Some of you know that I spent 20 years at Presque Isle High School. I began as a teacher and coach and left the school in 2010 as their long-time principal. Nearly 21 years ago, however, something happened that would forever scar my otherwise fond memories of my time at PIHS. I was the school's Athletics Director, and on Monday, March 17, 1997, the school was basking in the glory of having won the State Class A Girls Basketball Championship just two days earlier. We defeated Portland High School which was a real 'David and Goliath' moment for a rural high school in Maine!

At approximately 11:00 AM on the morning of March 17<sup>th</sup>, however, the celebration ended. I was first on the scene of a stabbing on campus, the devastating result of two freshmen boys fighting over someone's girlfriend. The fight had been planned over the weekend; it was well known among students. In fact, classmates encouraged Rick Gray to bring a knife to school for protection from the much larger David Pelkey. The fight began; David pulled Rick's shirt over his head so he could not see, and Rick began flailing a pocketknife which sliced into David's chest. The blade pierced his pericardium (the membrane that encloses the heart). The crowd

scattered. Rick pulled his shirt down, walked into the store across the street from PIHS where the fight took place, and told the clerk what had happened. A friend tried to help David back to school (just a few yards away), but he collapsed by the school's flagpole. I arrived on the scene—dumb luck, really. I was headed to the Main Office when David's friend ran into the school screaming for help. I ran out to see a 16-year-old lying on his back, struggling to breathe, and bleeding badly. I applied pressure to the wounds and tried to comfort David. He was dying. I assured him...told him to listen for the ambulance's siren. Other staff came out to help; I maintained pressure on the wound. "You're hurting me," David kept saying. His mother arrived just before the ambulance, and I found myself coaching a grieving mom through the final moments of her son's life. EMTs arrived and took him away while I stood there covered in blood. I never saw David alive again. He died on March 20<sup>th</sup> in a hospital in Bangor.

The days, weeks, and months that followed were difficult for our school and community. School killings were extremely uncommon. It would have been two years later before the first big school shooting in Columbine. For me, March 17<sup>th</sup> is a bad day. David Pelkey would have turned 37 a few months ago. His parents and sister were never the same. I never saw Rick Gray again. What we learned as the school investigated the incident was deeply painful—so many students and even adults knew that the fight was impending. Students knew all morning on March 17<sup>th</sup> that Rick Gray had a knife. Not one single person said anything. It's a painful and regrettable truth for me.

There has been much talk about school safety and gun control since February 14<sup>th</sup>, and rightly so. Finding ways to make our schools safer is something that we'll always work on, and I hope my responses to those who have reached out to me have been helpful in some small way. What I know for sure is that it is the students themselves who can make a tremendous impact on the safety of their classmates and teachers. **If you hear something or see something, you must pledge to say something.** The population of Kittery Schools is one-third the population of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland. We are small and nimble...we know each other. If someone had said something on the morning of March 17, 1997, two families in Presque Isle, Maine would be intact.

I know that March 14<sup>th</sup> has been identified as a day of action—one month to the day after the Parkland, Florida, school shooting. I have confidence in our school leaders and teachers that whatever students decide to do will be thoughtful, meaningful, impactful, and safe. I hope that whatever our students decide to do will not be orchestrated by adults but by the students themselves, that the students' actions that morning will be honest and genuine, and that implicit in their activism will be a commitment to report concerns related to school safety to a responsible adult at school. The goal, of course, is that we never again have to add a day of infamy to an already long list. That is a cause we can all get behind.

