

ASHLEY CASTILLO HERNANDEZ

My name is Ashley Castillo Hernandez. I live in South Central Los Angeles. I moved to South Central after the first time I experienced violence in Los Angeles, which was when I was six years old.

I know that I need to say something to somebody.'

I was living in Carson, and the day before I had gone to CVS. I picked up a little press-on nails kit. I was so excited to try it because I had an older cousin who would do her nails and I wanted to be like her. The next day, I went with my friends all the way to the back fence of the school so no one would see us. We were putting on the nails until this guy came around with his bicycle and he waved at us through the fence. He told us that we “looked really beautiful today.” We didn't know what to say other than “thank you” because that was the polite thing to say. Minutes later, we ended up going on lockdown.

The yard ladies came out to look for us and pushed us back to our classrooms. We found out that this individual was trying to hop the fence of the school to come in and kill people. The one thing that I distinctly remember is that he had an Army vest on, things that I thought looked like grenades, with pockets attached to a belt that he had on. I didn't know why I felt like I needed to remember this visual for later, but I felt like it was important. What it brought me back to was Sandy Hook (a 2012 elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut). It had been just after that time, my mom telling me that if there was ever an active shooter in my class or at my school that I had to cover myself in blood and play dead and not breathe. Part of me felt like I should have known in that moment. I felt responsible that I didn't tell anybody. It's like a core memory. The next time that happens, I know that I need to say something to somebody.

I didn't know that it was something I can do now.'

Gun safety was my main concern throughout school. There were a few lockdowns in middle school where there was confirmed to be an active gunman in the area surrounding the school. I noticed a lot of times when we would go on lockdown, I tended to take them more seriously than other people. Other people would make jokes about it, but I usually would be the one hyperventilating, trying not to cry, and texting my parents. [When the school shooting at] Marjory Stoneman Douglas happened (2018 in Parkland, Florida), I was in the seventh grade. I remember people were staging walkouts. Our science teacher said, “If you walk out, you're going to be marked absent. You're a terrible student, and there are going to be so many

repercussions.” Nobody had the courage to walk out except for me and another friend of mine. We saw the halls were empty, so we thought that nobody else had walked out and it was just us. But in the quad, everybody had rallied. They had already been out there. It was a nice feeling to be there. I felt a really strong sense of community. I was like, *oh my God, there's people who care about this stuff. I found my people.*

I was 15 when I joined SDA (Students Demand Action). They were doing the Summer Leadership Academy, and they were only going to do it in six high schools. Mine was not one of them. But when I saw it, I was like, *“I'm going to apply,”* and they took me. I was the only student from my school. It was the best way I could have spent my summer. It really felt like something I could be passionate about. I always knew I wanted to get into politics, activism, and social justice. I thought that was something that I needed to wait until college for. I didn't know that it was something I can do now.

‘They just stormed in.’

Swatting is when somebody calls and creates a false report. The [reported] incident is so urgent that the SWAT team needs to be involved and do a sweep. It was a normal day in my senior year. It was the morning, and I was waiting to go to my next class. The bell was seconds from ringing, and the principal comes on the intercom. His voice was shaking. And that's what scared us because we've never heard him talk like that ever. He's like, “We're on a lockdown. Don't leave your classrooms; don't go anywhere. Stay in your classrooms. Lock the doors. We are on lockdown. This is not a drill.”

My classroom was one of the negligent classrooms. We were supposed to do a new [shooter response protocol] called ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate), but none of us were aware of what it was or how to do it. The normal thing is turn off the lights, lock the doors [and] shut the blinds. But my teacher, she didn't do anything. And she proceeded to teach. She was acting very nonchalant. Everyone else was in the classroom freaking out, backing into corners, trying to shut off the lights. We didn't know if the doors were unlocked because the doors can only lock with her key. They kept us in there for almost three hours.

Everybody had different experiences they reported to me. I was the person who collected that information for a school board member. He and his team wanted to hear what happened because he heard that it was bad. Nobody followed the procedure, except for two teachers. There was an anonymous Instagram account that would post statements from students. It was a whole week of students putting, “I felt so safe with this teacher, but with the rest of them, I would not want to be in their class. I don't care if I'm across campus, I'm going to run to this teacher's classroom because I know they're the only one who cares.”

The reason why the principal came on so shaky on the intercom was because he was being pointed at by police [with guns]. What had happened was that the police department got this swatting call. They were trying to get in touch with the school, but they didn't have the right extension to get in contact with them. But there were police at the Starbucks two minutes away walking down the street.

So, they came in, and there were students walking into their next class because the bell was about to ring. And they started pointing [guns] at students in the halls, telling them to get down. People have never been through this procedure before, so some people froze because they had this gun pointed at them. They didn't know where to put their hands, their head, or anything. They were freaked out. We had never done that before. This is not like something that we were ever trained or taught. They just stormed in. I was crying and I was hyperventilating, but my mind pushed it aside because I was in Students [Demand Action]. When other things happened in the past, the SDA account was the one reporting it. It became more of a community where it was parents and teachers and administrators following this account to get the reports that I would put out.

'I still don't get over it.'

I was in the corner crying, texting my field organizer. They would go and find me the news sources as soon as they would come out, send them to me, and I would put them on the page, rapid fire. I'm texting people back, trying to help people, because that's always been my nature. It kind of helped me in the moment because I knew that I was worrying, but I could help someone else worry less. At least they get an easier version than I did. I would rather have that.

I'd say, to this day, I still don't get over it. There are times where I'll be watching TV and they'll bring up something similar, and I'll sit and think about it. I cry because it's either this incident, the elementary school incident, or the incident where I was held at gunpoint outside of my house here in Gardena house as I was getting out of [an] Uber. That was in December of 2022.

'Activism saved my life.'

I think what impacted me about the high school [swatting incident], they kept emphasizing that it wasn't a drill. I started getting pictures and videos of the SWAT team searching students and pointing [guns] at them as they're emptying their backpacks. There was so much going on, and so much negligence. I mean, there was a teacher going around. He left his classroom and started banging on the doors to get them to open them. He's like, "Somebody on Twitter said that nothing's happening. Can you stop all this nonsense now because it's not even real." There were kids crying because he was banging on the doors. So, when they

didn't open the doors, because he was the coordinator in charge of that program, he would go in with the master keys and open the doors. Everyone was scared thinking they were about to get shot.

The other important thing was that during the swatting, they started taking people outside to the field. We were supposed to have an evacuation map on file, but it was the wrong one. It was the fire evacuation map. They started taking people out of the buildings to the field where we thought this shooting was happening. They thought there was an active shooter there, and they couldn't take them anywhere else because that's where the map says they're supposed to go. There were people that were shoved into the gym, people who are getting searched with ARs (assault rifles) pointed at them. They thought people were already dead because the call was that six people had been shot in a classroom. It was a classroom [number] that didn't even exist.

[After the incident] all the school did was send a link and said, "We're going to have counselors on-site for resources," but they only had the counselors there for a day. I know the only thing that they did afterward in terms of teachers was having a meeting with the police telling them what they should and shouldn't do. From my understanding, from the other teachers who were in that room, there were no repercussions for anybody at the school.

What got me through was activism. Activism saved my life because I don't know what direction my mental health would have gone if I didn't have it to direct my energy and my focus on.

I left [this school] because of the report that I had done with the school board member. They said, "We're going to pull your graduation, you're not going to walk the stage." And I was like, "That's ridiculous." They told me that if I continued doing my activism work, they were not going to allow me to walk the stage because I was reporting it to the school board member.

'It's a lack of procedure.'

Another problem was that the school was surrounded by parents in the streets [during the swatting]. It was so crowded. That day, there were two car crashes that happened across the street because of the crowding. There needs to be a thread where parents can go to get updates, so they don't get [updates] from Twitter. You can condense the CSSP (Comprehensive School Safety Plan) and send it as a packet [for parents]. It needs to be something that's condensed where it's like, *okay, if something is happening at my child's school, where do I go? Where can I look for information?*

It's a lack of procedure, not doing things when they're supposed to be done. There has to be a fine if the system fails the students because of lack of implementation. They should be encouraged to want to make sure they get it right. It can be as simple as putting [CSSP or other guidance] in classrooms. For you

to be able to go to if there's no teacher or if it's a substitute, to open it and be like, *okay, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. If we need to go, we go this way.* We need to know where to go.

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