

KOREEN CEA-HEIER

My name is Koreen Cea-Heier, and I've been living in LA County since July 5, 1965, when I came to America. I'm an educator. Before retirement, I had 32 years in education at public schools in LA. I've been teaching since 1991. I taught at Aragon Avenue Elementary School in Cypress Park since 1995.

'We were in survival mode.'

I was out on a walk with my friend; it was our lunchtime. We were getting something called bionicos and we pass nearby [a student's] house. 10 minutes later, this student of ours, a middle school student, was in front of his home. His parents were packing things up to move to Colorado to get him out of the gangs. The gangs drove by and shot him to death.

We were having a fundraiser to help the parents with their funeral expenses. I was preparing for this fundraiser, and we were about 15 feet away, adjacent to our faculty lunchroom, when the shooting took place. All of a sudden, we heard that loud noise sound – Da! Da! Da! We immediately knew exactly what it was. We went straight out and looked for kids and grabbed them and took them wherever we could. We went into the auditorium. I don't know what I was thinking. I grabbed them, whoever we had, and then we were flat on the floor. We made a game because I was teaching early childhood. We talked about flat as a pancake. "We're going to be flat as a pancake. Let's see how flat we can be." We had practiced it on the schoolyard and in the classroom.

While we were in the auditorium, what we're hearing, it wasn't just one pop. It was back and forth – *Pop! Pop! Pop!* Then we heard this screech, and we heard cars leaving. We were trying to redirect the kids and we were trying to disassociate ourselves from what was going on, trying to portray a sense of calmness. "Something is happening outside, but we are safe in here." We kept saying, "Don't worry! They'll take care of it." We were giving them things to color. That auditorium was multipurpose. They use it for childcare in the morning and after-school care, so we used their supplies.

It was a strange, surreal thing. Sadly, in our community, there are a lot of nighttime gun shootings. The kids were used to going down on the floor when they heard the sound of guns... *this too will pass*. It's a hard thing to live with. I think we were all in shock. We're like, *okay, we're just going to focus right here. Let's color*.

It was so surreal when it was happening. They were at our school, the SWAT team, but it took a while before we were released. It was like 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., when the police finally came around and released us, including the kids. They had to make sure that nothing else was going to happen. They had the coroner coming. When we were allowed to exit, we had to go one by one. We had to tell the police who we were, they had to check us off and then we were allowed to exit. I didn't know where all my students were.

All I remember is going through that gate and seeing the other parents. I was obviously running late to pick up my children. When I went to the after-school childcare where my kids were, one of my friends saw my face and said, “Are you ok?” I said, “I don't know.”

‘This is not okay.’

I found out later that one of my other students – their parents were in the local gang – came out with their guns and they were having a gun battle with the people that had shot and murdered our student. It was only one person that was shot, and it was intentional. They say in the papers that he was part of the Mexican Mafia and he had just gotten out of jail. As we found out later, he was high as a kite, and it was a hit. It was on the grass in front of our school. If it hadn't been for the fact that all our staff was in the faculty room, it could have been worse. Shots went through there; bullets went through there.

I knew we lived in a community where there were active gang members, but I knew the parents. We had this peaceful co-existence. They didn't talk about what they were doing, and I didn't ask them. I never thought something like this would happen on school grounds. They were the parents, and I was the teacher. We had always done an earthquake drill, fire drill, shelter-in-place, but it was more in case of toxic fumes outside. We never thought of gun violence.

So, what comes next? We're talking to each other, the staff, and the PTA (Parent Teacher Association). Nothing was being offered. We got really upset and said, “We need something now.” We pushed and then [counseling services] came to us the following week. We did get somebody to come to our faculty and they said to the parents, “If your child wants it.” It wasn't like coming to each classroom and talking it out. We got very upset by the way things were being handled, especially how the news reports were like, “It was just a drive-by.” It was being pushed aside. We decided to reach out to the [teacher's union] to say, “We need to do something because this is not okay.”

We decided we're going to push this. We had a press conference. I have the local newspaper, where you can see the picture of our staff. I was so proud of our PTA mother. She was so brave. She's from the community and it was much more powerful. She was speaking as a mother of a child.

At that time, we did not have active phones in the classroom that you could use to call 911. So, we got the [outside phone lines] in each classroom. You can dial 911 on them. All of school district has them since that time. That's a positive that came out of it because they realized, “Oh, they're not going to shut up.” We also bugged the police. We had death threats against us for speaking up. It was very scary. We bugged and bugged, and we finally got somebody high up in command. He came to speak to us, and he made us a promise. We had a patrol car on our campus for a month.

Then parents were filtering to us that the gangs in the neighborhood had a meeting and said, “This is not okay that this happened. You do your business after 10 p.m.” With the combination of our school efforts, union efforts, the PTA efforts and the press conference, word got out. We started to put pressure on the mayor and the city council. Now it’s a felony if you commit a crime within a certain zone of the school area. That’s because of us.

‘The trauma finds a way to come up.’

Mental health is so important. It's very uneven in schools when you [have a program] that will help every child deal with their emotions. We're given a prescribed, “Here's your social emotional program.” It's complex; it's not that easy. There was a time that we had some money, there was a social worker. She came into my preschool class, and she was helping [students] with their feelings. She was really at their level and connected and showed me how [to do it] with incredible books. It wasn't a generic, one-size-fits-all program. We dialogued about it.

Support school psychologists full-time. They should be allowed to also help staff members, as well as the students. Teachers don’t know what to do when they are in a heightened space and then it triggers somebody else. Teachers need a lot of support and understanding.

I think the trauma finds a way to come up years later and then something else happens. That stuff was not okay to sweep under the rug. Yes, we needed to be brave for the kids, but I don't think the school district knew what to do. I was empty. I felt hollow. It was very robotic. *Okay, we're just going to go to work. We're just going to do simple things.* It's so weird how you internalize and absorb the message, “It happened. You're alive. Move on.” I grew up with my mom's stories of what she experienced in World War II. She was so quiet about it. Now in her older age, she'll bring it up more, which I'm glad she's finally able to do. It's crazy that you hold on to it. Years later, [the shooting] comes up. I told my husband about it when we were dating. I said, “I have to sit in *this* place in the restaurant.” It's gotten a little bit better, but it's there.

‘There is the survivor's guilt.’

With a therapist, I’ve been in my feelings and in my body more. My therapist now says, “You have complex PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).” That's what I'm experiencing. It leaks out in all aspects of your life. My way of wanting to feel better is to help other people that are suffering. I have to remind myself that I need to take care of myself. There's that mentality of, *if we go out and crusade and we stop all the violence in the world, I'll feel better.* That's a weird thing that I'm fighting within myself. I think it's the helplessness. It was

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very sad. It was traumatic. You don't know when it's going to happen. Why my brain goes whenever I'm in public, *scan, scan scan*.

I feel like, *okay, I'm retired. Now I can deal with this*. It takes a long time for us to be able to say, "I'm worth it." It makes me sad and mad that we're told we're not worth it. I would say to teachers surviving a school shooting, "You're worth it. You're important. You matter. You have every right to grieve." That was scary. That was awful. It was a loss of innocence.

There is the survivor's guilt. Mine was a little smaller, but it was there. That's a common thing. Violence is violence and it hurts, and it wounds, and it damages. Those wounds, if you don't deal with them, they're going to fester. You need to deal with it. There are other people out there. You don't have to do it alone.

