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## These families have a road map for those in Buffalo, Uvalde. They've been there.

Families who have experienced sudden tragic loss from mass shootings know what's ahead for grieving families in Buffalo and Uvalde and beyond.

Peter D. Kramer New York State Team

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The mother woke, and for a split second, it hadn't happened.

Her boys — J.T., 12 and Jesse, 6 — would be up soon, filling their Connecticut home with energy. Jesse would kick off his pajamas and leave them wadded on the floor, eager to get to school.

For months during that first year, Scarlett Lewis would start each morning this way — with the gift of a glimpse of the as-it-was. PJs, the getting-ready, the train set she'd let Jesse open ahead of Christmas.

Now, all she had was that brief, sleep-clouded moment, before the as-it-was surrendered to the as-it-is. "It comes crashing down," she said, "the reality of what happened." It's a reality so horrific that even today we compress it into a single name to bear the weight of unimaginable loss: Sandy Hook. She calls it "The Tragedy."

On Dec. 14, 2012, Jesse was killed with 19 classmates and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Charlotte and Daniel and Olivia.

Josephine and Dylan and Madeleine. Catherine and Chase and Ana. James and Grace and Emilie. Jack and Noah and Caroline. Jessica and Avielle and Benjamin and Allison. And Jesse. And the adults. Rachel and Dawn and Anne Marie. Lauren, Mary and Victoria. Scarlett refused to return to her farmhouse. A painter by training, she dreaded the still-life awaiting her: Jesse's boots, his jacket, his toothbrush by the sink, his toys all over, his PJs. She and J.T. would stay with her mother, across town.



Scarlett Lewis and her son, Jesse  
SCARLETT LEWIS

I will never go back, she vowed. I'll never go back.

But the funeral home needed clothes for her 6-year-old to wear in his casket, and Scarlett insisted she be the one to choose.

Everything there, as it was, a still-life after death: boots, PJs, train.

How to dress him for the final time? Nearly 10 years later, the memory puts her back in front of his dresser, weighing two things, only one of which really mattered anymore, except to a mother about to bury her child days before Christmas: Jesse liked to dress sharp, and it was cold.

Scarlett's voice catches. Her chin dips, eyes glisten as she remembers: flannel-lined jeans, a turtleneck, and a gray zip-up polo sweater, one of his favorites.

### Families linked by tragedy

They call themselves members of a club they never wanted to join, forever tied to those who lost loved ones in the same violent attack: The Sandy Hook Families, the Parkland Families, the Aurora Families.

They know what lies ahead for their newest members, families in Buffalo and Uvalde and Highland Park and beyond. And they're ready to help.



Memorials at the Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, New York, Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, and Highland Park, Illinois, honor those who lost their lives in recent mass shootings.

GETTY IMAGES AND ASSOCIATED PRESS

They've formed a coalition — Survivors of Tragedy Outreach Program, or STOP — under the umbrella of Tuesday's Children, a nonprofit born of 9/11. They're committing to the long-term recovery of these communities, through peer-to-peer counseling and support for community groups that are already in place.

They're not exactly sure what that help will look like — perhaps a picnic and fellowship to start, or making phone calls to smooth the way for programs — but they're all in. From Virginia Tech to the Boston Marathon, from Aurora to Columbine to Pulse. Gold Star families and 9/11 families know, too, about sudden loss.

For years, they've been down the road the families in Buffalo and Uvalde have been on for nearly two months. Because of that, they say, they can communicate more by sitting down with them over a cup of coffee and saying nothing than a convention of counselors could ever hope to convey. Survivor to survivor.

Sallie Lynch, senior program and development consultant at Tuesday's Children, said her organization is "there after the casseroles stop coming, after the media's gone away, after the initial crisis intervention."

"We know from our experience working with the 9/11 community ... that the long-term support is really what's needed when people typically might snap out of that composed state that they're in, with the initial shock," Lynch said. [CLICK THUMBNAIL BELOW TO LISTEN TO SALLIE'S INTERVIEW.](#)



### Lost to violence: Tuesday's Children

Tuesday's Children has been helping grieving families for 20 years. Now, it leads a survivor-to-survivor network to help Buffalo and Uvalde families.

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM

In interviews in recent weeks, members of STOP and others spoke about the first year after their tragedies, a year of firsts marked by absence.

First Father's Day without Daddy. First birthday without a birthday girl to blow out her candles. First Christmas without Mom.

It's a year when shock puts them in a fog that Scarlett Lewis considered a blessing. If she had been fully aware of what was going on, she said, she might have lost her mind.

Families in Buffalo and Uvalde have turned the first pages on their first year, in full view of a public transfixed by their losses, which came 10 days apart in May.

Every day seems to bring another damning revelation out of the school shooting at Uvalde's Robb Elementary, where 19 students and two teachers were killed, "nearly a carbon copy of Sandy Hook," Lewis said. But in Buffalo, the shock of a man accused of driving 200 miles to kill 10 Black people in a Tops Friendly Markets store has already been replaced in the national spotlight by more recent horrors. And the Fourth of July will never be the same in Highland Park, Illinois, where a gunman took aim at a red-white-and-blue parade, killing at least seven.

The first year means navigating the crush of media and the reality when the media moves on to the next shooting, pushing previous tragedies further back in the public mind.

The 2009 American Civic Association shooting in Binghamton is largely forgotten beyond New York's Southern Tier. But those 13 families — many of whom were immigrants whose loved ones were in an English class, seeking a foothold here — endured their Year of Firsts Without, too. And they can never forget.

### The first days

The year, they can tell you, begins with those first foggy days.

They nodded and thanked the bringer of the casserole, but didn't have the appetite to eat. Somehow, they navigated wakes and funerals, lost track of what day it was, needed reminding it was time for bed, or time to wake up. Some experienced Scarlett Lewis's split seconds of before; others did not.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Linda Beigel Schulman — whose son, Scott, was murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018 — doesn't call herself a survivor.

"We survived physically, but we are still victims," she said at a press conference declaring June 2022 to be Gun Violence Awareness Month in New York.

"No bullet pierced my body. I have no physical scars," Beigel Schulman said. "However, the emotional and psychological scars that I have are just as real, just as painful, and will continue to last for the rest of my life."

### Anger, anxiety, depression, sadness

Heidi Horsley's brother, Scott, died at 17 when his car exploded. A traumatic loss upends things in an instant, brings a flood of existential questions, Horsley said, in a stream of consciousness that captured those first days, and the days ahead for Buffalo and beyond.

"You feel like you're going crazy, sometimes," she said. "You don't recognize yourself. You don't know who you are. You don't know how you're going to survive. You don't know if you want to survive. You don't know how you're going to go on. Who am I without Scott in my life? Who are we without the people that we loved in our lives? Who are we now that everything we ever believed in has been turned upside down and our loved one has been murdered?"

The emotions are powerful — anger, anxiety, depression, sadness — but Horsley named her foundation Open to Hope for a reason.

"I don't want to tell people they have to be hopeful," she said. "I want to suggest that maybe they can be open to the possibility, open to the idea of hope."

She and her mother, Gloria, have a weekly podcast interviewing families whose lives have been touched by trauma, and a cable television show through Manhattan Neighborhood Network.



**CLICK THUMBNAIL TO LEFT TO LISTEN TO HEIDI'S INTERVIEW**

### Lost to violence: Finding the possibility of hope

When she was 20, Heidi Horsley lost her brother, Scott, and her cousin, when their car exploded. She now counsels those affected by trauma.

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM

### 4 thoughts for a grieving Buffalo

Horsley, a psychologist, offers four keys for families facing trauma, in Buffalo and elsewhere:

Don't judge your grief process: "Feel those feelings, including some you might not like. You might be angry, but anger is a legitimate emotion after a homicide."

Take your time: "You've got to do it one step at a time. At first, they just need support and love and control, over the decisions they're making and control over where they're going to go. And not being forced to do something before they're ready."

Don't isolate yourself: "Get support. It can be virtual or in-person."

Get moving: "If you can get out and do any kind of exercise, even if it's small, because trauma is trapped in our bodies. If you can even walk 20 minutes a day, something that simple will change the way that we feel."

**CLICK THUMBNAIL ON RIGHT TO LISTEN TO MAGGIE'S INTERVIEW.**

**Tragedy's stakeholders, and an onion**

### Lost to violence: Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue

Maggie Feinstein says the first anniversary of Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue shooting saw emotions run high. And it could happen in Buffalo.

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM



Maggie Feinstein didn't lose a family member in the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, but, she said: "We say that when it happened, you had to wait for the 0% chance you didn't know somebody because that's how our community is. It's a very tightknit community."

Feinstein now heads the 10.27 Healing Partnership that grew out of the response to the attack, in which 11 congregation members were murdered.

The first year involved trauma triage she likened to an onion, with the grieving families at the very center, the focus of the most support. Each layer outward holds a different group: first-responders, the immediate community, the wider community.

"Once you know which layer of that onion you're on, how do you lean in to offer support and lean out to get support?" she said. "Because if all of us knew how to support the people who are closer to the center of the onion, but also how to get support from someone who's further from it, then what we can do as a community is we can try and see each other and acknowledge the differences in our experiences and acknowledge the differences in our responses."

"But that's hard to do."

### 'Something extreme happened to them'

Sallie Lynch, at Tuesday's Children, said recovery varies by tragedy, but experiencing trauma in the most ordinary of places — a concert, a synagogue, a nightclub, a school, a grocery store — could make the ordinary impossible for a while.

There's fear everywhere. It doesn't feel like anywhere is safe.

Grief is entirely individual, and the first year is full of reminders.

"These are horrible events and they should never happen to anyone, but they have happened," she said. "We have to allow people to take in the enormity of what happened to them and have the response that is appropriate for that."



Sallie Lynch, Tuesday's Children

"And we can't stigmatize them if it seems to us like people are reacting in an extreme way. Something extreme happened to them and it's probably fairly normal that they are reacting that way and they need to, to process it."

### 'Be careful,' Buffalo

Scarlett Lewis couldn't believe what she was hearing, on a conference call in the weeks after Sandy Hook, from parents whose lives were touched by tragedies dating to the Oklahoma City bombing. She wishes now she had believed them then.

"I wish that I knew that there was going to be people with feet on the ground and bank accounts open, ready to take advantage of the tragedy," she said. "I wish that I knew that people were going to use

Jesse's picture to try to make money and to further their own cause. It was shocking to me. You don't expect that. You're in your most vulnerable, weak position." [CLICK THUMBAIL BELOW TO WATCH SCARLETT'S INTERVIEW.](#)



### Scarlett Lewis lost her son, Jesse, at Sandy Hook

Scarlett Lewis at her Sandy Hook, Conn. home June 13, 2022. Her son, Jesse, was one of 20 first-graders murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012.

PETER CARR, ROCKLAND/WESTCHESTER JOURNAL NEWS

The Sandy Hook Families were soon at the center of a battle with United Way of Western Connecticut, which received more than \$10 million in donations, not all of which would go to the families.

The agency created a foundation, which decided how to distribute the money. In the end, \$7.7 million went to the families; the rest was kept by the foundation. The process was faulted for its lack of transparency and it ushered in a new best-practice in the wake of violent events: Local leaders should act quickly to create a nonprofit to gather donations to directly aid the families.

"I would say that to Buffalo," Lewis said. "I would say, 'Be careful. Just be mindful of who you allow into your inner circle and make sure they come in through referral from somebody else.'"

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### Frayed nerves and fistfights

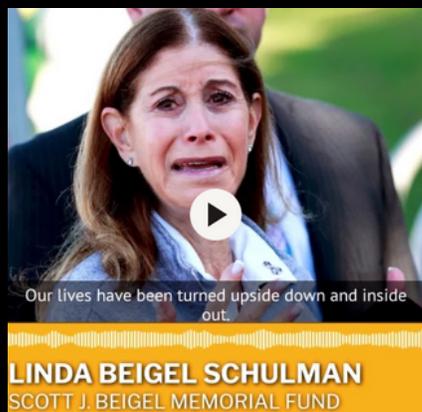
Eventually, somehow, the Year of Firsts Without will come to an end, with the first anniversary of the tragedy. The Tree of Life first anniversary arrived in Pittsburgh with frayed nerves, Maggie Feinstein said. The same could happen in Buffalo.

"It can happen in these small communities where we lose empathy for each other. We say: 'Why is this person doing this? Why is that person doing that?' We're under such a microscope and we're so close to each other that it's so hard to really hear each other and to really be present with each other. I would say that that's one of the hardest learnings."

It comes with all the built-up grief of that first year, she said, but also when a community is grieving all at the same time.

"Everywhere from the grocery store to a spinning class, the week of the anniversary, there were fistfights breaking out in places," Feinstein said. "People were just so heightened and so tense." Nobody told Pittsburgh, until it was over, that that's normal.

"I would want people in Buffalo to know that that is normal. It is normal. And what we can do about it is we can really try hard to not take our own sadness, frustration, trauma, out on each other," she said. The families know the grief doesn't end at the end of that first year.



**CLICK THUMBNAIL TO LEFT TO LISTEN TO LINDA'S INTERVIEW**

**Lost to violence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School  
Linda Beigel Schulman's son, Scott, was murdered in Parkland, Florida,  
in 2018. She has since become a gun-safety champion.**

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM

Beigel Schulman, the Parkland mother, said: "Many times I've been asked: 'When do you think you will get over or get past the sense of loss and grief you feel?'" she said. "Let me answer you right now. You never get over it. You never get past it. You find some days will be more difficult than others. Mother's Day. Father's Day. Birthdays. Holidays.

"For me, the hardest day is Valentine's Day, February 14th. February 14th is the day that my son was shot in Parkland. It's also the day that my daughter, Melissa, was born. February 14th, as you can imagine, is one of the happiest days of my life and also the worst day of my life."

### **In Aurora, remembering the love**

Heather Dearman's cousin, Ashley, lost her 6-year-old daughter, Veronica, and her unborn baby in the movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado, in 2012, and she was left a paraplegic. Dearman now runs the 7/20 Memorial Foundation.



PETER D. KRAMER VIA ZOOM

"The first year I don't remember. The first year of that was a whole fog," Dearman said. "The one thing I can remember is that the city of Aurora did a one-year anniversary vigil where we put roses on a wreath. If the one thing I remember about the first year is the community coming together, then I think that's a good thing, that I'm remembering the love more than anything else."

Part of Dearman's mission is to pay that love forward, coordinating volunteers who fold origami cranes — signs of love and hope — and creating wreaths that are sent to communities grieving gun violence. Several are taking shape and will find their way to Buffalo and Uvalde.



CLICK THUMBNAIL TO LEFT TO LISTEN TO HEATHER'S INTERVIEW

### Lost to violence: Aurora movie theater

Heather Dearman's cousin, Ashley, lost so much in the Aurora, Colorado, movie theater shooting in July 2012. Heather made her pain her purpose.

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM

### Make your mess your mission

Some survivors want to return to their lives as they knew them, to get back to work and a semblance of what they had before the tragedy. Others seek a purpose tied to their loss. Heidi Horsley calls that "making your mess your mission."

Scarlett Lewis created the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, a character-education school curriculum in use in all 50 states. It fosters social and emotional learning, which "teaches children how to manage their emotions, feel connected, and have healthy relationships."

Linda Beigel Schulman created the Scott J. Beigel Memorial Fund, which sends at-risk kids whose lives have been touched by gun violence to sleep-away camps. And Beigel Schulman has become a gun-safety champion.

"My mission is to do something that will rid our society of senseless gun violence and make sure no other mother, father, sister, brother and uncle, friend or co-worker ever joins my club," she said. "Let's work together and put a sign on the door of my club that says: 'Membership closed. No more admittance.'"

### Lost to violence: Sandy Hook

Scarlett Lewis' son, Jesse, was 6 when he was killed with 19 classmates and 6 teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012. He now motivates a movement.

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM



### 'You can't pour from an empty cup'

In Thousand Oaks, California, Michael Morisette's daughter, Kristina, was killed in the 2018 Borderline Bar & Grill shooting.

Morisette said the compassion he received after Kristina's death — all those meals, all those people standing by to comfort him and his family — made him want to be there for others. He had heard about three suicides after school shootings and wanted to make sure that his community wasn't affected in that way. He could listen, he said, with an empathy he hadn't had before Kristina's death.

He was trained to join Give an Hour, the group that counseled him, a group that helps military, veterans and their families.

He called the process "moving forward."

"I don't even like to use the word 'healing' because it sounds like there's a destination," Morisette said.

"It's not really about a destination. It's just about a direction."

Morisette said he and other members of STOP check in with each other regularly, to see how everyone's doing — how they're really doing — before counseling others.

"We do have to be careful with overextending ourselves. You can't give what you don't have," Morisette said. "You can't pour from an empty cup. You've got to take care of yourself first. Then you have some value to other people."



Michael Morisette and his daughter Kristina Morisette pose in this undated photo. Kristina Morisette, 20, was one of 12 people killed in the Borderline Bar & Grill mass shooting on Nov. 7, 2018, in Thousand Oaks.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/MICHAEL MORISETTE



### Lost to violence: Thousand Oaks, California

Michael Morisette's daughter, Kristina, died in a mass shooting in a California country music bar in 2018.

He has tapped a wellspring of empathy.

PETER D. KRAMER, NEW YORK STATE TEAM

[CLICK THUMBNAIL TO LEFT TO LISTEN TO MICHAEL'S INTERVIEW](#)

### Survivors see new shootings differently

Part of the first year is also dealing with violent events that follow. Ten days after the Tops shooting came Uvalde.

Feinstein, in Pittsburgh, said families who have known traumatic loss take the news of a new shooting differently. She doesn't call them "triggers," out of sensitivity. She prefers "trauma cues."

"Most people don't know that the time between when you know the event happened and when they announce the names, the families know exactly what's going on, and that's a really hard time for them," she said. "They say they watch and watch and watch to see when they're going to announce the names because they know those families are waiting for that step forward. And it's really hard."

Further out on Feinstein's onion, neighbors notice where the media is staging, where they're focusing, another trauma cue.

"Every time we watch it happen again, you have to go through again a feeling of deep empathy and sadness for all those small things that other people may not know, who haven't been through it before," she said.

Nurturing, healing, love

Meanwhile, in Sandy Hook, Scarlett Lewis doesn't have those split-seconds waking moments, any more. She'll have flashbacks to Jesse riding around the farm on his horse, but she is busy with her Choose Love Movement as the tragedy's 10th anniversary nears in December.

There are plans to unveil, at last, a memorial to the Sandy Hook dead, but Lewis didn't wait. She and her artist friends made a memorial of their own, a mural on the side of her barn.

Jesse is depicted as a duck, looking at his reflection. And overhead, 20 geese fly in a "V" formation, with six larger geese nearby. Raindrops fall on one part of the pond, tears of sadness. On the left side, an old tree has the words Jesse wrote on a farmhouse chalkboard, the words that drive the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement. They're the same words that adorn a birdbath filled with rubber ducks down the road at Zoar Cemetery at the final resting place of Jesse McCord Lewis: Nurturing, Healing, Love, rendered by a 6-year-old as "Norurting, Helinn, Love."



A birdbath (left) at the gravesite (right) of Scarlett Lewis' son, Jesse, who was one of 20 first-graders murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012.  
PETER CARR/THE JOURNAL NEWS

There are other reminders, which are part of Lewis' everyday life.

Within weeks of the tragedy, 26 large copper stars were anchored to the roof of the firehouse at the entrance to Sandy Hook Elementary, an artist's constellation of grief: six large stars for the adults; 20 smaller stars for the children.

Each family was given a star of their own. Scarlett's hangs in the peak of her farmhouse still.

Stars on buildings are a New England thing, she explained, so there's no way of knowing — unless you are a Sandy Hook intimate — which are décor and which are five-pointed memorials to devastating loss, markers from an unthinkable day at the start of an impossible first year, the beginning of a Year of Firsts Without, and a life of as-it-is, not as-it-was.