Survivor of 1989

BY PAULINE LIU

Times Herald-Record EASTCOLDENHAM — Holli Dayton of Walden was troubled by the news of the Sandy Hook massacre.

As a survivor of the East Coldenham Elementary School wall collapse Nov. 16, 1989, the Connecticut school disaster has special significance for the 29-year-old.

Dayton was just 6 when a hurricane-force gust of wind toppled the wall of the cafeteria at her elementary school, killing nine children.

The images from Newtown, Conn., brought her own painful memories rushing back.

"I heard that many of the children (in Newtown) were six and seven years old. And for me, the correlation will always be there," she said.

Dayton recalls that several of the children who died in East Coldenham were seated at tables next to hers.

She said that by some mistake, she was initially listed among the dead. The tornadolike storm caused the rain to "fall sideways," followed by the deafening sound of the large windows shattering, she said.

"I was one of the babies of that group," Dayton said. "You could see a bunch of kids crying, and other kids were covered in blood."

Dayton recalls that teachers shouted for the children to run away from the wall. Though she fell on shattered glass, she managed to literally escape without a scratch.

She says it took years before she could confront her awful memories – because she made up her mind to suppress them.

"I completely concentrated..."
Coldenham tragedy reflects on how she coped

on blocking it out and forgetting about it,” she said. “I didn’t want sympathy from grownups, which for a 6-year-old felt kind of strange.”

Dayton explained those memories resurfaced eight years later, when as a freshman in high school, she got in a discussion with a classmate about what caused the wall to fall in.

“I chose not to think about it until I was older and could understand it,” she said. “I don’t wish any child to go through what I went through, but I’m thankful for the person I was able to become.” Dayton added.

Kathleen Tillman, an assistant professor of psychology at SUNY New Paltz, says it can take time to process trauma.

“When children experience trauma, they often need to process the traumatic event several times as they go through different developmental stages.”

As a teenager, Dayton was able to re-process her memories and feelings at a different level, Tillman said.

Dayton returns to the East Coldenham school each year to mark the anniversary. She credits her Christian faith, her supportive grandmother and her school principal, Harvey Gregory, for helping her cope with the traumatic experience.

“He knew every student in school by name, and he was there for us,” she said. Gregory remained on the job until his retirement in 2007, and his supportiveness during the crisis is one of the reasons he is much loved by former students.

“What was I going to do, bail on them?” he said. “Who was going to know the kids, parents and teachers better? It was my job to help put the pieces back together.”

Gregory explained he didn’t do it alone. There was an onsite team of psychologists at the school for several years, and Gregory said he had his own support network of family and staff to help him.

Like Dayton, he sees similarities between the tragedies in East Coldenham and Newtown.

“Dealing with why a person would shoot a bunch of kids is probably more difficult than dealing with a wall falling, but the horror and the emotion are the same,” he said.

“What made this one (Newtown) different from Columbine was that it's babies. Newtown, like East Coldenham, will never be the same.”

He wonders whether a team of counselors, former students and teachers from East Coldenham could offer help to those grieving in Connecticut.

“For example, the teddy bears,” he said. “We had a memorial wall of teddy bears six feet deep, and we eventually had to make a decision to remove the teddy bears.”

Thousands of teddy bears, gifts and other items have likewise been sent to Newtown by well-wishers from around the world.

“When to remove a memorial is a tough decision, even though the teddy bears in Newtown are now all wet and soaked,” Gregory said.

With help from community, staff and teams of experts, Gregory believes East Coldenham has “worked at putting the pieces back together again” and that perhaps the same can be done for Newtown.

“There are going to be rocks in the road,” he said. “I’m not going to say it can become a better place, but you can make it a positive place to be.”

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