

SUNY New Paltz trauma expert counseled Newtown families

By **JEREMIAH HORRIGAN**

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NEW PALTZ — Like everyone else who learned about the shooting of 20 young children and their six adult defenders in Newtown Conn., James Halpern was horrified.

Unlike almost everyone else, Halpern got a call the day after the shooting from the national American Red Cross, a call that sent him into the grief-filled center of what had once been and would no longer be a quiet, bucolic American town.

By the time he reached it, Newtown had become not a town but symbol of something that had gone terribly wrong in the country's understanding of itself. It would be a large part of Halpern's week-long mission there to help the families of the victims to understand the inexplicable, to comfort the inconsolable.

Halpern is a professor of psychology at SUNY New Paltz and director of the college's Institute for Disaster Mental Health. The institute works with a number of national and state mental health and emergency agencies and organizations, offering training to health care professionals as well as undergraduates in an emerging field of study whose time has evidently and tragically come.

Halpern went to Newtown as part of an elite team of Red Cross volunteers. His expertise is unquestioned; Halpern literally wrote the text book on disaster mental health — "Disaster Mental Health: Theory and Practice."

Halpern calls what happened at Newtown an example of a "national trauma," comparable only to 9/11.

"Trauma can be defined as a kind of shaking or shattering of our basic assumptions," he said last week. "You can see it as existentially, spiritually, how we conduct ourselves in this world, our feelings about ourselves and the world."

In other words, he says with a sigh, Newtown, like 9/11 “was not supposed to happen.”

Halpern spent his first day at Newtown, the day after the shooting, in the town’s firehouse, where the surviving children were re-united with their families.

He remembers the hand-lettered signs and spontaneous memorials that sprang up all over town. His biggest impression posed a variety of problems for the families, the town and counselors:

“The town was overwhelmed by press. There were satellite dishes, there were lights, mikes, trucks — the world was there.”

Crowds of reporters were difficult enough for family members to deal with. What do you say when a nationally known news anchor calls and asks to talk to you?

Halpern said he counseled family members to think about what they needed in such a circumstance; they didn’t need to feel obligated to respond.

Overall, he said, the behavior of the press “didn’t seem to be that helpful.”

What was helpful, he said, was the decision to assign a Connecticut State Trooper to each of the grieving families. Halpern said that when the next disaster happens, he believes it would be equally useful to assign a mental health professional to future survivors.

One of the most significant events Halpern felt to be extremely helpful was President Barack Obama’s visit to the families the Sunday following the shooting.

Halpern speaks softly. He chooses his words carefully. Yet, when he spoke about what Obama did that day, the hours the president spent comforting the families, his voice grows softer still and takes on a shade of wonder:

“He comes in, the man, and the symbolism is very powerful. And he holds those family members, as long as they need to be held. And he comforts them, representing the nation comforting them.

“It was pretty extraordinary.”

Halpern has witnessed the tragedy of Newtown in such highly intimate ways that the question is unavoidable: how — and why — does anyone volunteer for such heartbreaking duty?

He pauses before answering.

“The satisfaction comes of feeling useful at a time when most people are feeling helpless.”

Halpern will tell you he’s neither a religious nor a spiritual man. His experience at Newtown was unlike any previous counseling he’s done, including working with the Red Cross in the wake of 9/11.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever done this sort of thing that I’ve felt connected to, representing my community — like a whole lot of people who wanted to help — so I was channeling that a little bit, you could say.”

No one needs to be reminded of the pitched political and cultural battles that have sprung up in the wake of Newtown. Halpern uses an analogy of a grieving family to illustrate how what he calls “flexibility” needs to enter the national picture:

People grieve in different ways, on different timetables, he said. There are cultural differences and gender differences. Differences that may only manifest after years or decades go by. And problems arise when someone gets impatient with someone else’s way of grieving — when they think the other is being unthinking or uncaring.

“It used to be that people believed that grief follows a certain path. Nonsense. I would hope that all of us would be thinking a little more flexibly. We need to think about what we can do to change, not only what the other guy can do to change.”

jhorrigan@th-record.com



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