

# Real-world pressures spurred Hornet girls to action

By Mark Farinella for the Attleboro Sun Chronicle

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Jun 29, 2018

For members of the Mansfield High School girls' basketball team, the summer schedule is practically full, including part-time jobs, summer league basketball and other sports-related activities, and of course, beach time when possible.

But this year, the Hornets are squeezing something else into their busy schedules. They are being enlisted to paint 3-foot-high "M" symbols in the driveways of Mansfield residents who want to show their school and community spirit and support a good cause at the same time.

The "M" symbols, which resemble the letter logo that adorns the sides of the school's football helmets, are a means of raising funds that will enable the Hornets to travel to a two-day tournament at Newtown (Conn.) High School in December. The town is the host community of Sandy Hook Elementary School, where in 2012, 20 children ages 6-7 and six adult staff members were shot and killed by a 20-year-old man armed with military-style weapons.

On the first day of summer, almost all of the Hornets gathered at a home in the center of Mansfield to paint the first "M" on a driveway on that particular street. It was one of more than 175 orders the team has received (for a suggested \$25 donation in return) since the fundraising effort began several weeks earlier, with hopes of many more to come.

The three captains of the team — seniors-to-be Maggie Danehy, Sydney Mulkern and Mady Bendanillo — said that there's much more to the letter-painting effort than just raising money for their trip or spreading school spirit around town. It's given them an opportunity to add their voices to an important national discourse.

"I think it's a good idea for us to support the families that have been through a lot. We might not know them, but it's nice to give our support to them," said Bendanillo, the Hornets' point guard. The tournament in which the Hornets will play, called "Threes for Sandy Hook," will help raise funds for charities that benefit the families of victims of the 2012 attack upon the school.

According to the Washington Post, more than 220,000 American primary and secondary school students have been exposed to gun violence since the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. The Sandy Hook shooting marked the first time students so young had been targeted, but the initial outcry for stricter gun control following the tragedy failed to sustain momentum.

This year alone, there have been two major incidents at public high schools — at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., and at Santa Fe (Texas) High School, in which 27 more lives were lost. In all, there were 23 instances of gun violence at U.S. schools through May.

"I think that in a way, a lot of people are scared," said Mulkern, a shooting guard. "These things never really happened until like now, and that's really scary. I think Mansfield is a safe place and I'm not really that worried, but there are places that are nice that can get like that."

Newtown High has about 1,500 students in grades 9-12, similar in size to Mansfield High. Many of the surviving students that were at Sandy Hook Elementary on the day of the shooting have entered the high school, while the targeted classes would still be a few years away.

Bendanillo said it's difficult to fathom what it must have been like to have been present there on Dec. 12, 2012.

"It's just how it went down," she said. "They were so young and they couldn't do anything about it. Obviously, we want to support those families. If raising awareness is what we can do and this is how we're doing it, that's good."

The game-changer, the captains agreed, is how the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have become fierce advocates for gun-law reform following their school shooting. Students such as Emma Gonzalez and David Hogg have become national leaders in the effort to enact more sensible legislation regarding military-style weaponry.

"Ever since Parkland, the kids there have been doing a really good job of spreading the word," Bendanillo said. "We've never seen anything like it before. Everyone talks about changing things, but it never really happens, and they're the first group of kids to really speak out.

"I think it starts with our generation," she added. "School shootings have been more recent, so maybe older people can't really understand what the story is with us."

"I think if we put our minds to it and work hard as a community, there can be a difference, and maybe we could change some laws about guns to prevent all these things from happening," Mulkern said. "But as a community, we need to change this."

They believe, or at least hope, that Mansfield High School will continue to be spared the violence that has disrupted the lives of so many in other communities.

"It never crosses my mind until people start talking about it on the news or whatever," Danehy said. "But I feel like Mansfield's pretty safe."

"I'm not scared," Bendanillo added. "I don't think Mansfield is the type of area where that could happen. I think you'd know people that would, like, try to do that. But you just don't know."

While the captains spoke with a reporter, the other team members quickly and efficiently painted a green-and-white "M" on the driveway, and then prepared for their next assignment of the day.

But they were all keenly aware that by raising funds to attend the Newtown tournament, they were going to be addressing a much larger issue, and representing Mansfield in a concerned and compassionate way.

"By us going and showing our support, it's like, it's not just them," senior guard Emily Vigeant said. "The whole country has come together this year, especially with the Parkland movement. It just goes to show that no one is alone in this. Everyone's together, and we're working together to try to make change and make sure this not a common thing."

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