

Hornet girls boost town's spirit while supporting Sandy Hook families

By Mark Farinella; for the Attleboro Sun Chronicle

mfarinel@thesunchronicle.com

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On Dec. 12, 2012, the lives of 20 children and six adult staff members were snuffed out senselessly in a mass shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. It took barely more than five minutes for a 20-year-old man, armed with military-style weapons, to carry out this horrific action.

It wasn't the first mass shooting at an American school, and it certainly has not been the last. But the unfathomable horror of Sandy Hook was the fact that the children shot by Adam Lanza before he took his own life were all between 6 and 7 years old — innocent victims who could not have imagined in their wildest nightmares what was about to happen to them when they arrived at their school that morning.

Mansfield High School basketball captains Maggie Danehy, Sydney Mulkern and Mady Bendanillo were 12 years old when the Sandy Hook shooting took place, so their initial memories of it may not be as fresh in their minds as other, more recent school shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., and Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas.

Seventeen students died in the attack at the 3,158-student Douglas High on Feb. 14. Ten people were killed on May 18 at the Texas school, closer in size to Mansfield High at approximately 1,500 students. And all the while, a national debate continues to rage over whether current gun control laws are sufficient as a deterrent against future outbreaks of targeted violence.

The three Mansfield captains and their teammates and coach have found a way to make their voices heard.

The Hornet girls' team will travel to Newtown this coming season to compete in the seventh annual "Threes for Sandy Hook" basketball tournament on Dec. 28 and 29. The showcase-style tournament raises funds with the help of corporate sponsors to promote "healing through sports" in a community still anguished over the senseless loss of life six years ago.

"I think it's a good idea for us to support the families that have been through a lot," said Bendanillo, the Hornets' point guard. "We might not know them, but it's nice to give our support to them"

"We can't really know the feeling because it didn't happen to us," said Danehy, a 6-foot forward. "But maybe this is something we can do to help prevent it from ever happening again."

To participate in the Newtown tournament, there were obstacles to overcome — not the least of which is paying for the trip. But with a little help from an idea originally employed by their friendly rivals from Foxboro, the Hornets have found a way.

The basketball players are painting the letter "M" in school colors on driveways throughout Mansfield. For a reasonable donation (suggested \$25), players will come to houses and use cut-out templates to adorn a driveway with a flawless symbol of school spirit — a symbol that, given the purpose of the trip, also means so much more.

"It makes a connection with people that want to show pride in their town and their school," Mansfield coach Mike Redding said. "And then you add that Sandy Hook aspect to it, and it's exploded in terms of support with people that want to show their pride in Mansfield, support the girls' program and indirectly support a great cause at a time when these things are important. It's kind of the perfect storm of good things coming together."

Redding, who has brought many of his football and basketball teams to far-flung locales over the years, credited Foxboro boys' coach Jon Gibbs and his Warriors with first using the driveway-painting idea to raise funds for a recent team trip.

“We basically stole the idea — they did it last year, and parents have mutual friends and the kids play in AAU programs together, so we adopted it,” Redding said.

Redding’s Hornets traveled to New York City last year to play in a mid-January tournament, but finding space for the games in the middle of his team’s Hockomock League schedule was not easy. This year, as he searched state association websites for something closer to the holidays, he came upon an advertisement for an expansion of the “Threes for Sandy Hook” event at Newtown.

“For us, it was a perfect match — a chance to play out-of-state against really good competition, a chance for our girls to spend three or four days together fairly early in the year to create that camaraderie and bonding, and then obviously, the added bonus to try to serve such a great cause,” Redding said.

“I think a lot of the high school players right now were probably at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012 when this all happened,” he added. “It’s a pretty unique opportunity to play great basketball, to have a great event for your team, and to serve a greater cause in a time when these things are so important.”

With the two-day tournament assured and a fundraising plan in hand, Redding needed some help to organize the effort.

Jane Maher is a mother of five daughters, three of whom have already been Sun Chronicle all-stars in basketball from Mansfield (Janet, 2013-14; Caroline, 2014-15; Ann, 2018). Grace and Rosie will be next up, and the schools they are attending exist in a different world than before a litany of school-based tragedies known best by singular names — Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, Santa Fe.

“It’s very real,” said Maher, a permanent substitute at the Everett W. Robinson School working with special-needs children. “There’s a lot of awareness that it could happen to anyone. I believe it has to affect them. Every day you see it ... you certainly do as a parent.”

“The kids go over it regularly,” she added. “They practice lockdowns frequently. Even when Janet was in school, I don’t remember it being like this.”

Maher arranges the appointments for driveway painting, which multiplied rapidly after the Mansfield School Committee gave the official go-ahead for the trip early in the month. Meanwhile, Redding talked with his captains about the meaning behind the effort to bolster school spirit within Mansfield’s borders.

“The kids were engaged in discussing this,” Redding said. “The events down in Florida and Santa Fe, Texas, have kind of brought everybody’s consciousness to a higher level.”

Originally, two student survivors from Parkland were supposed to visit Mansfield and talk to students, but travel plans fell through. U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III (D-Brookline) visited the school and participated in a spirited discussion as well. And now, Redding said, he can see his players maturing and understanding the deeper issues facing them and their school.

“In our program we’ve got 10 seniors, he said, “and I can see several of them becoming community leaders and maybe getting into politics. And if we can, through this tournament, connect them with other activists and maybe that carries through college, then maybe we’ve done much more than just coach basketball.”

That’s why he sees this tournament as an excellent teaching opportunity.

“Our program’s done a good job,” he said. “We’ve supported the Joe Andruzzi Foundation, we’ve done the Hearts for Hope ... but now, this is a chance to extend that outward nationally and regionally, to think beyond just community service in Mansfield, and to think really on a national level that ‘maybe I can make a difference here, make a big difference that’s going to save lives in the future.’ It’s a pretty powerful point for this generation to continue the momentum they’re building, and I think our students feel like they are a part of it.”

To date, there have been about 175 orders for driveway painting, and the number is expected to grow. Part of the reason is Mansfield's lengthy run of success in interscholastic sports, but the Sandy Hook angle is also attracting a lot of interest.

"Everybody sees the M's and they ask where they got it," Danehy said. "And when we tell them our reason for doing it, it really gets things going."

"We've had a great response from families with younger kids," Redding said. "It's not propaganda, but they're buying into being proud to be a Hornet. They want to get to the high school and keep the traditions going in football, basketball, baseball, among others ... so you've got that young generation excited and wearing the Mansfield gear and wanting those M's in their driveway."

Beyond that, the team members have embraced the notion that their presence in Newtown in December will represent Mansfield as a caring community.

"They certainly realize that this is a two-fold effort," Maher said. "They're doing something very positive in this community, and will be helping out a community that's still rebuilding its spirit."

Mark Farinella may be reached at 508-236-0315 or on Twitter at @sunchronsports.

Mansfield residents wishing to have their driveways painted may contact Maher at jane.maher@comcast.net for more information.