

The New York Times***A Lesson of Sandy Hook: 'Err on the Side of the Victims'***

A tidal wave of aid bore witness to the power of human kindness, but the money that engulfed Newtown, Conn., also sowed division.

By Elizabeth Williamson

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NEWTOWN, Conn. — Scarlett Lewis sees reminders of her son Jesse — who died at age 6 with 19 classmates and six educators in the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting — in photographs on her refrigerator door, in portraits she painted of him from memory and now, uncomfortably, in the Newtown Community Center, a soaring new complex.

Built with a \$15 million grant from General Electric, the employer of the father of the gunman who killed Jesse, the center will open this summer as an anchor meant to bring the community together. But to Ms. Lewis and some others who lost family at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the new center feels more like a wound.

“It’s painful to see,” Ms. Lewis said, “because I know what I lost in order to pay for it.”

In the six and a half years since the deadliest elementary school shooting in American history, more than \$100 million in federal, state, corporate and private money flowed into this community of about 28,000 in southwestern Connecticut. Although the tidal wave of aid bore witness to the power of human kindness, so much money engulfed the vulnerable, wounded Newtown that it inevitably sowed division. The town became a case study of how Americans’ material expressions of grief can become more an obstacle than an aid to recovery.

At the heart of the trouble was a question: Should donations in the aftermath of tragedy go to the victims’ families or be shared with the entire community?

After the shooting in December 2012, a dispute over that question broke out between the United Way and the families of some victims, and scars from that battle fed anger about the community center. Adding to the tension were donations that poured in to 77 recipients, including not only local charities, houses of worship and parent-teacher associations, but also ad hoc fund-raising websites that were unprepared to track or distribute the largess.



Scarlett Lewis and Neil Heslin, Jesse's parents. Ms. Lewis founded the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, advocating social and emotional coping skills in schools' curriculums to combat bullying and violence. Hilary Swift for The New York Times

Merchandise arrived by the truckload, including 60,000 teddy bears and more bicycles than Newtown has children. So many flowers and stuffed toys clogged intersections that the town gathered, composted and burned them, aiming to incorporate the resulting "sacred soil" into a memorial to the victims.

"Whether you have direct involvement in the tragedy or not, you're hurting, and you're going to have anger," said Robbie Parker, whose 6-year-old daughter, Emilie, died at Sandy Hook. "If you throw money into that, then that is like gasoline on a fire."

The families embraced acts directly memorializing their loved ones. Firefighters built 26 playgrounds dedicated to the victims in towns ravaged by Hurricane Sandy. Monte Frank, Newtown's counsel, founded "Team 26," which each year makes a long-distance bicycle trek to other communities touched by gun violence; this month the group rode to the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

And virtually all of the relatives of the 26 who died established foundations or public service endeavors in their loved ones' memory.

"We really are grateful for the love and support we received," Ms. Lewis said.

But Newtown remains a lesson in the unintended consequences of well-intended generosity. Part of its legacy has been a shift in approach by other communities grappling with the fallout from mass shootings and attacks. Starting with the Boston Marathon bombings the year after Sandy Hook, civic leaders began bypassing established charities to set up independent, special-purpose funds devoted solely to helping the victims and the families of the dead.

"The American people have an incredible charitable impulse," said Kenneth Feinberg, who administered the victim compensation funds after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and volunteered to adjudicate in Newtown. "But nobody knows exactly what to do when the money comes in."

Disbursement Disputes

“Our hearts are broken today, for the parents and grandparents, sisters and brothers of these little children, and for the families of the adults that were lost,” President Barack Obama, struggling to maintain his composure, said in a televised statement hours after the shooting. He has called it the worst day of his presidency.

That same day — Dec. 14, 2012 — the United Way of Western Connecticut, which as an established nonprofit was able to immediately receive tax-deductible contributions, worked with Newtown Savings Bank to create the Sandy Hook School Support Fund. A United Way news release said the goal was to “provide support services to the families and community affected by this senseless tragedy.” Millions of dollars began rolling in.

The families were warned early on that there could be trouble. In the first days after the shooting, survivors of other mass tragedies contacted them to tell them that established charities like the United Way do not always transfer donations to the people most affected, but retain money for other, separate needs — after-school or jobs programs, for example.

They were right. Kim Morgan, the United Way chapter’s chief executive, said at the time that her organization had solicited unrestricted gifts on purpose. It intended for the community to decide how best to spend the money, citing all Newtown residents’ long-term counseling needs.

Mr. Parker, Emilie’s father, was not happy. The United Way chapter “used our children’s names and photos to raise money, saying it was to support ‘the families of Newtown,’ and then they fought to give it to the entire community,” he said.

“Granted, there’s an argument that community services have to be really heightened after something like this. I agree with that,” he said. “But in my opinion, you can’t mislead the public to donate. I just felt like they weren’t being very transparent.”

Ms. Morgan, who still leads the United Way of Western Connecticut, declined to comment beyond saying that “we continue to be concerned and have compassion for everyone affected by this terrible tragedy.”

By March 2013, the United Way had collected more than \$10 million and created the Newtown-Sandy Hook Community Foundation, putting a board of five community leaders in charge of distributing the money. But the United Way retained an advisory role, and some families felt the organization would influence the outcome.

“I don’t want to paint anyone in a bad or negative picture,” said one board member, Msgr. Robert Weiss, the pastor of St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church in Newtown, who officiated at the funerals of eight children. “It was a challenge. We were just five local citizens trying to do the best we could.”

The foundation scrutinized the thousands of donor notes and emails that came with the money to try to determine the donors’ intent, and by April reached a decision: \$7.7 million would go to the families of the 26 victims, to two wounded educators and to 12 families of surviving children who were in classrooms where children and educators were killed. The remaining \$3 million and any future donations would stay with the foundation.

The outcome did not satisfy all of the families, and Mr. Feinberg was brought in to arbitrate. Controversy raged into the summer of 2013, but by July, a committee led by a retired federal judge established a formula for allocating the \$7.7 million among those directly affected, with the bulk of the money going to families of the dead children and educators.

The next month, the Connecticut attorney general released a letter saying the United Way’s decision to designate \$7.7 million for victims’ families did not legally violate the donors’ intent. But he criticized the organization and Newtown Savings Bank for a lack of transparency.

“It was an abuse of the good will of Americans and the international community who thought that when they were giving, they were giving to the families,” Nelba Marquez-Greene, whose daughter Ana Grace died at Sandy Hook, said in an interview. “I don’t know anyone who cared about the money — nothing replaces our loved ones — it’s just that if you’re going to raise money, then it should go to victim families. Full stop.”

Reflections on Charity

By November 2013, with the wounds from the United Way fight still fresh, General Electric announced its \$15 million gift to Newtown to build “a central meeting space for the whole community.”

The company, then with its headquarters in neighboring Fairfield, Conn., employed many Newtown residents, and had sent a team of G.E. executives to Newtown after the massacre to support overwhelmed town officials. But among some Sandy Hook parents, the nearly completed center stirs outrage.

“Do you know what it feels like to drive by a 15 million dollar center built ‘in honor’ of 12-14 for THE COMMUNITY when so many people are going without support?” Ms. Marquez-Greene wrote in March on Twitter. “It makes me angry. It’s shameful.”

Pat Llodra, who was Newtown’s first selectman on the day of the shooting, stood in her Sandy Hook kitchen recently, reflecting on the role of charity in promoting healing in Newtown.

“My heart is very much with the community center,” Ms. Llodra said, adding that most in Newtown agree. But in 2013, she favored rejecting G.E.’s money.

Ms. Llodra acknowledged “many missteps, a few ‘redos’ and doubts,” she said. “But this was balanced by the sense of trying to accomplish something worthwhile for the community.”

Sandy Hook families have done that, channeling money given to them into efforts to save others from the fate that befell their children, siblings and spouses. Ms. Lewis wrote a book and founded the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, advocating social and emotional coping skills in schools’ curriculums to combat bullying and violence. Alissa Parker, Emilie’s mother and an author, co-founded Safe and Sound Schools, using her experience to help communities ensure comprehensive school safety from prevention through response and recovery.

The Ana Grace Project, founded by Ms. Marquez-Greene, offers emotional learning and violence prevention programs for children through school partnerships, training for teachers, music and arts program support.

Mr. Feinberg said Sandy Hook was among the most painful of any mediation he has witnessed. In public meetings he recalled one parent saying that withholding money from the victims’ families was “compounding the death of my child.” Another said “keep the money, and bring my little boy back.” And some residents angrily protested that the protracted debate re-victimized the families.

“There were no villains,” Mr. Feinberg said, emphasizing that he understood the United Way’s desire to help all Newtown residents. But “we err on the side of the victims every time.”

Mr. Feinberg said that while “every tragedy is different, Lesson 1” from Sandy Hook is for the authorities — the mayor, the city council or the governor — to swiftly establish a single nonprofit benefiting victims and their families, so money intended for them is not atomized, or given to charities that lack the experience or ability to distribute it to them.

“How many people who watch reports on TV about the death of these kids send a check to the United Way, as opposed to helping out these families?” he said. “All the money should go to them.”

In 2013, Newtown’s struggle over the United Way funds guided Boston’s response to the marathon bombing, Mr. Feinberg said. One Fund Boston, unveiled by Mayor Thomas M. Menino and Gov. Deval Patrick of Massachusetts a day after the bombing, raised \$61 million, all for people directly affected, within 60 days.

After the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016 in Orlando, Fla., Mr. Feinberg said, he and Camille Biros, his associate, persuaded the organizers of four fund-raising efforts to consolidate them into a single fund benefiting the victims and their families.

After the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., the Broward Education Foundation, which supports Broward County Public Schools, established a GoFundMe campaign dedicated solely to victims. The campaign raised nearly \$2 million in six days.

Parkland students designated a separate GoFundMe effort to support their march on Washington for gun safety legislation, stipulating that any leftover funds would go to victims and their families.

“It’s unfortunate that we were the ‘lesson learned,’” Ms. Marquez-Greene said. “I’m just grateful for subsequent victims that finally, someone heard.”