

Pat LaMarche: When reality is just too awful

If the massacre in Maine had been the first, there might be some understanding of how it happened. If there'd been no Columbine two and a half decades earlier. If no one had shot and killed four people further down Interstate 295 in Bowdoin and Yarmouth, six months earlier. But, not a peaceful year has gone by since the Columbine massacre. Every one of the last 25 years has been cratered with gun violence and the willful destruction of human life.



Pat LaMarche

Back in the last century I wrote a number of op-ed pieces for this paper.

I'd just finished my 1998 run for governor. I'd worked my way back into the media as a morning disc jockey on 92Moose and B98.5. One of my first columns was about Littleton, Colorado, where a pair of teenage gunmen

turned their high school into a slaughterhouse. Within an hour, 15 people were dead — including the shooters.

I remember vividly — as many of us do — the news reports that these young men had packed the cafeteria with makeshift bombs, then opened fire on students and teachers. Listening to the radio, as I drove to my own kids' middle school, a broadcaster spoke of Columbine High School teacher Dave Sanders. Sanders bled to death after valiantly ushering a hundred students out of the cafeteria. He'd saved their lives and sacrificed his own. Mr. Sanders' last words: "Tell my family I love them."

I didn't know Mr. Sanders, but his words told me all that I needed to know. Sanders knew he was dying. And with his last breath — he sent comfort and tenderness to the people he loved most. The weight of that man's humanity crushed me. His loss. His family's loss. All so senseless and insufferable. Excruciating, heartbreaking and infuriating — but I don't have to tell you that — not if you're reading the Sun Journal.

Before I go on, let me offer my deepest condolences to the people of Lewiston. My children were born at St. Mary's, my mom lost her battle with cancer at Central Maine Medical Center, and I spent countless hours laughing and playing with my own family at Just-in-Time Recreation. Mainers, and others, scattered across the nation feel tied to your loss. Tied and powerless.

If the massacre in Maine had been the first, there might be some understanding of how it happened. If there'd been no Columbine two and a half decades earlier. If no one had shot and killed four people further down Interstate 295 in Bowdoin and Yarmouth, six months earlier. But, not a peaceful year has gone by since the Columbine massacre. Every one of the last 25 years has been cratered with gun violence and the willful destruction of human life.

It's stunning, really. That so many smart and good people in our United States of America haven't found a way to end this senseless killing. A friend of mine, Lutheran minister Matthew Best, thinks we can't stop the shootings because we've lost track of the humanity. Matthew thinks we don't talk enough about the Mr. Sanders of these events. And the reason we don't?

Because it's just so agonizing. I know it's true. I'm not mentioning the Lewiston victims by name — because I fear causing the survivors and families any more pain.

Thanks to Matthew, I spent this past year focused on gun violence. Long before Oct. 25 — when my brother called from his Lewiston apartment to let me know he was safe, but others were not — I agreed to write a book with Matthew and eight other collaborators. Last January, at the start of the bloodiest year in mass shooting history, we committed ourselves to elevating the humanity at the center of the slaughter.

It's not a documentary. It's a novel — one that tells the story of eight ordinary people marching toward a common yet deadly destiny. Our hope? That if we wrote fiction, perhaps people would talk about the victims. The humanity. The loss. If the truth of dead children in Uvalde silences us, perhaps we could talk about fictional ones. And if we talk to each other, maybe we'll stumble upon a solution.

The U.S. Department of Justice cites five commonalities in mass shooters. In most cases, all five apply. They're men. They've experienced early childhood trauma. They find inspiration in the actions of other mass shooters. They have an identifiable grievance or crisis point. And they have the means to carry out the attack.

If we want to stop Columbine, Uvalde, Yarmouth, Lewiston, and the tens of thousands of other mass shootings, we need to address these causes. Removing one commonality decreases the odds that senseless murders will occur. Dismantling all of them? Well, look around the world — ours is the only country where random destruction of total strangers happens daily. So clearly, it can be done.

My co-authors and I wrote “[American Roulette](#)” to amplify the conversation around mass shootings. Every author has pledged 100% of our book royalties to ending gun violence. Our publisher pays a nonprofit managing the money, directly. We don't see a dime. [Fred Guttenberg](#), whose daughter was killed in the Parkland shooting, and [Kris Brown](#), president of Brady, voiced hope that the book will help.

If you prefer reality, read about Mr. Sanders. Then work to end gun violence.

No one knows better than you, dear Lewiston. It's time.

Pat LaMarche is an author, freelance journalist, and former gubernatorial candidate, with strong ties to Maine.