

# The Navy Yard Shootings and the Wendt Center

A Letter to our Supporters, an Expression of Gratitude  
from Michelle Palmer, Executive Director

Dear Friends of the Wendt Center,

On Monday, September 16th, at 8:30 am, the unthinkable happened. A gunman entered Navy Yard Building 197 armed with a sawed-off shotgun and serious mental health issues. By 11:00 am, he and twelve others were dead. I want to share with you what happened next, so that you may better know what the Wendt Center does when the unthinkable happens in our community.

**10:30 am.** As part of D.C.'s first response team, we received a call requesting that a team of therapists go to National's Stadium, Lot B, to support family members and friends waiting anxiously for evacuated loved ones and to provide trauma care to Navy Yard employees.

**11:30 am.** Their schedules and routine quickly cancelled for the day, five of our therapists were assembled at Lot B, ready to do what we do best - support, connect, be with those who had just survived the worst day of their lives, and with those whose loved ones had not.

**12:00 pm.** Worried family and friends began arriving, anxious about their loved ones. We heard the thunder of search helicopters overhead and the fear in the air was palpable.

**2:00 pm.** The buses began to arrive with evacuees. Some needed to borrow cell phones to contact loved ones; others needed to find transportation home (most had had to leave their personal belongings behind, including house and car keys, wallets, and cars). Others needed to talk, and to walk, and to cry. One early arrival to Lot B saw her friend and colleague shot and killed and was carried to safety by a co-worker. She was unable to enter the covered lot because it felt too much like the space from which she had just escaped. So she walked, and walked, and walked, and she talked, and she waited for her husband to arrive. She walked and talked for over three hours with one of our therapists, sharing her experience, what she had heard, and seen, and felt on what was supposed to be just another Monday.

As the day unfolded, our therapists sought out, connected with, and supported many family members and evacuees. By 4:00, we knew which had been able to contact their loved ones (and were now just anxiously waiting to see them, touch them, have proof that they were safe) and



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which had not and were waiting with baited breath, increasing tension, with each arrival of a bus. A young woman in her early 20's arrived somewhere in the mid-afternoon, by herself. Her name was Danielle. She was waiting for her mom. She had not been able to contact her. I asked her what building her Mom worked in. She thought it was Building 197, but wasn't sure. We waited, and we talked. We waited together for a long time.

**6:00 pm.** All the dead, I was told, had been fingerprinted. Only one death notification would be done at the Stadium. That notification would be to Kenneth Proctor's wife, who had recently arrived at Lot B. Together with the FBI, a Metropolitan Police Detective, a member of the Secret Service anti-domestic terrorism unit, and a Navy chaplain, I went to the restaurant at National's Stadium and waited for Mrs. Proctor to be brought in. It was clear to me as she was walking and talking with the FBI agent that she had no idea what we were doing there. The secret service agent delivered the news, and Mrs. Proctor dissolved in tears, began to shake and rock.

I looked around at the law enforcement staff - they were all looking at me, needing me to do something, to somehow fix Mrs. Proctor. But, there was no fixing Mrs. Proctor in that moment; her heart had just been broken. So, the task became putting Mrs. Proctor somewhat back together again so that she could walk out of that restaurant and break the news to her 15-year-old son who was waiting for her at home.

As Mrs. Proctor left, I went to check on Danielle, who had been waiting for her Mom. She was gone. I felt it was a sign that she was ok. I was ready to go home. I was tired, I was cold, and the experience with Mrs. Proctor left me feeling profoundly sad. But the FBI approached me and said we had six more notifications to do, here, at the Stadium. I had already sent all our Wendt Center therapists, cold and drained, home after an exhausting day. Members of the Department of Mental Health had also left, thinking, as did I, that our work for the day was finished. But for the next five hours, I became the face of one of the worst moments in six families' lives. Each person reacted differently to the news. Some cried, even wailed. Others sat in stunned silence.

**12:15 am,** September 17. I left National's Stadium, together with one of the FBI's Victim Response Unit. We were the last to leave.

The Wendt Center staff spent the rest of last week supporting surviving family members and highly traumatized Navy Yard employees at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, where our RECOVER program helps people who come to identify their deceased loved ones. We helped them there, as well as at the Navy Yard Emergency Family Assistance Center that was set up at Joint Base Anacostia.

The day after the shooting, I learned that the mother of Danielle, the young woman I had waited with and talked with - and who I thought was one of the fortunate ones -- was, in fact, among the dead. Her name was Mary Knight.

I saw Danielle last Thursday at a Navy/FBI family briefing. She ran to me and hugged me and thanked me for "taking care" of her earlier that week. At that briefing, family members gave voice to their pain, anger, frustration. As the briefing closed, they joined hands in a ritual of mutual support. Family members were asked to share the name of their loved one. One woman confessed she could not stop thinking about the shooter's parents. She felt terribly sorry for

them and asked everyone to please remember that the Alexis family also lost someone they loved on Monday. Amazingly, people began nodding and saying "Amen." It was a cleansing, healing moment during which the negative energy shifted and evaporated . . . The amount of grace, understanding, and forgiveness is something I will never forget.

It's been ten days. We are still "unpacking" it all; all that we saw, heard, and felt. There are, though, some things that I'm clear about:

. . . that the human spirit is resilient and gracious beyond anything we can imagine.

. . . that untreated or undertreated mental illness can have disastrous consequences.

. . . that the Wendt Center has the good fortune to partner with amazing local and government agencies.

. . . that the Wendt Center has the most talented and dedicated staff in the District of Columbia (maybe even the world).

And I know that I have never been more proud than I was last week to lead this amazing organization.

Warmly and gratefully yours,

*Michelle Palmer*