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# Column: What one mother's grief can teach us about responding to Chicago's heartbreaking violence

By HEIDI STEVENS  
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FEEDBACK

Nine-year-old Nathan Wallace holds balloons during a vigil July 5, 2020, for his 7-year-old sister Natalia

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Natalia Wallace was 7 years old when she was killed Saturday.

Her elementary school, Crown Community Academy of Fine Arts in North Lawndale, released a statement. Her first grade teacher [wrote this](#):

“Natalia was a very quiet and sweet little girl. She completed every assignment during class, got along with all of her peers, and colored the most precious pictures ever given to me. Natalia never hesitated to ask for clarity when needed. Sometimes, her quiet spirit gave her the strength to lead the reading lessons within her group, and she soared when it came to doing math.

“During e-learning,” her teacher continued, “Natalia was always present and participating. At the end of each class session, she would type in the chat box, ‘I Love You.’”

She was killed while visiting her grandmother.

Balloons are released July 5, 2020, during a vigil for 7-year-old Natalia Wallace, who was shot in the head and killed as her family celebrated the July Fourth holiday in the South Austin neighborhood of Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

A 14-year-old boy, not yet identified, was also killed in Chicago on Saturday. During the previous two weekends, at least seven other young children were shot and killed here, including a 20-month-old boy named Sincere, who died in his carseat.

And because this is Chicago, their deaths are seized upon and woven into a political narrative, while their families are left to process the shock and horror. I wince when I hear people say, “Where is the outrage?” It’s right there, in a mother’s broken heart, in a sibling’s shattered world, in a first grade teacher’s words: *She would type in the chat box, “I Love You.”*

I’m afraid that bone-deep grief and heartbreak too often get papered over and left out of the public discourse. I think they belong at the center of it.

A few years ago I wrote about [a memorial garden in Logan Square](#), planted in honor of 9-year-old Sofia Khan, who drowned in Lake Michigan. Sofia’s mom, Sheri Khan, hosts remembrance ceremonies there and invites anyone who has lost someone to come and find community and solace, maybe.

Last week, after another bloody weekend in Chicago, when 10-year-old Lena Marie Nunez was **killed by a stray bullet** that burst through the window of her home just a few blocks from the Sofia Khan garden, Sheri Khan sat down and wrote.

“Losing a child does something irreparable to your soul,” she posted on Facebook. “It shakes the foundation on which you built your life, your idea of

Sofia Khan picks flowers at Haas Park in May 2009. (Family photo)

what the world is about and how you fit. You don’t have the same dreams or big ideas or plans because those things lose their appeal and value. Every part of what you thought you knew changes.”

Purple coneflowers grow in the Sofia Khan Garden, tucked away in the corner of Haas Park on July 25, 2018. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

She continued:

“On my good days, I can be hopeful and sit with others in their pain and grief as I hang onto the joys that visit and I can remind myself of immeasurable blessings I’ve been given. On my best days, I can advocate and teach about grief and place my heartbreak in a box, high up on the shelf, so I can somehow in some way help.

“And, today, maybe on not such a good day, I’m a mom who has lost a piece of my soul, thinking about Lena’s mom, dreaming for her a community of mothers holding her when she is too weak to walk a step and bringing water when her throat is sore from sobbing and not whispering that everything is going to be OK because it’s not. It’ll never be OK that her baby isn’t here with her. I dream that she will vow to carry Lena’s spirit in the ways she chooses. And from one mother to another, I believe this is what we are made to do.”

I asked Khan if I could share her words here. She said I could. I told her I think Chicago is a place that wraps its arms around its wounded. I’ve seen it happen time and again. I asked her to help me understand the wound of losing a child.

“The world shatters,” she said. “We learn again and again to find our footing and our place in this strange new world without our children by our sides. We understand to our depths the allure of suicide. We find the people that we can tell that to. We choose every day to remain. Some days it’s a fight. Other days it’s a quiet, fleeting thought.”

Staying, she said, means finding ways to honor the child who’s no longer here.

“We are the ones left behind to do this,” she said.

Maybe all of us are. Maybe we are all that community of mothers (and fathers and educators and artists and politicians and activists and first responders and neighbors) that Khan wrote about, holding onto the grieving when they are too weak to walk a step.

I keep thinking of the words of Darlene Hightower, Rush University Medical Center’s vice president for community health equity, when [we spoke recently](#) about creating a healthier Chicago: “There are so many community-based organizations doing incredible work,” she said. “Pick one. Volunteer or write a check or do both.”

[My Block, My Hood, My City](#) just announced it’s awarding \$50,000 in peace grants to individuals and organizations who pledge to find creative solutions to reduce Chicago’s gun violence.

“This is the grief in action that can be healing,” Khan told me. “The other choice is despair and ultimately resignation. I do not choose this.”

None of us should. The work of putting grief into action should never rest solely on the shoulders of the grieving.

Join the [\*\*\*Heidi Stevens Balancing Act\*\*\*](#) Facebook group, where she continues the conversation around her columns and hosts occasional live chats.

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