



(Top Left) Alumna **Morgan Pace** displays a sign expressing support for the victims of the massacre that took place at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Feb. 14. (Right) Young activists listen intently to speakers at the #NoMoreExcuses rally held in Marion Square on Feb. 19. (Bottom Left) Activists hold signs protesting the current gun policies at the rally in Marion Square on Feb. 19. *photos // Carly Knight-Carrier*

Florida shootings spark shock

Friends' deaths motivate freshman to try to bring about change

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3:14 p.m.

Sitting in geometry waiting for the final bell to ring and a text comes in from her mom.

"It's on national news," her mom texted. "Happened in the freshman building."

That was one of many frantic texts freshman Ava Gallo would receive and send on Feb. 14.

Valentine's Day.

The day two of her close friends were killed in a mass shooting at her former high school, Marjory Stoneman Douglas in Parkland, Fla.

Gallo, who moved to Mt. Pleasant from Parkland in December 2017, could not eat, could not peel her eyes off the TV screen as she spent the entire afternoon and into the night watching the news.

She tried to get in contact with friends back home, hoping and wishing the two girls who had not responded that afternoon were safe -- still in a locked, dark classroom but safe.

2 a.m.

She finally went to sleep, but her mom gave her the news the next morning.

Freshmen Alyssa Alhadeff and Alaina Petty, two of Gallo's first friends in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, were confirmed dead -- two of the 17 students and teachers massacred in the shooting.

She didn't believe it.

She had never lost anyone close to her before. The sadness, the horror did not set in until the next day.

Gallo thought back to Alyssa, her first best friend in high school, whom she'd gone to Marjory Stoneman Douglas Homecoming with and who had aspirations to be a professional soccer player. Alaina sat next to her in geometry class. She was passionate about JROTC.

The day after the shooting, Gallo couldn't think straight -- tests, classes, hearing "did you hear about what happened in that school in Florida?" whispered through the 4,000 students' mouths in the halls. Finally, she could not handle it anymore.

"I just couldn't function those first few days," Gallo said. "Over time, I found myself getting angry about this. Like why would this happen to somebody I know? Just mad that someone would do this."

Her mom emailed English teacher Patrick

Martin the night of Feb. 14 so he would know what Gallo was going through. After talking with Gallo, he needed to speak out about gun violence and about school shootings.

"It hit me pretty hard. Just being a high school teacher," Martin said. "I just feel like the degree of separation between me and people who have been affected by gun violence in schools is getting smaller and smaller."

Gallo and her family made the move from Parkland to Mt. Pleasant halfway through her freshman year -- not for her dad's job but because they had a feeling

“It was really surreal. It was hard to believe that I would have been Ava Gallo there.”

-- a feeling that something was "off" with Parkland, Gallo said.

"I just felt guilty, thinking that I was able to get out before it all happened, but my friends weren't. It was really surreal. It was hard

to believe that I would have been there. It just didn't seem like something that would happen to you or your friends," she said. "Just hearing mass shooting after mass shooting, I keep knowing more people who know victims. Just to know that my friends were victims is really sad to hear."

Gallo, her mom and Martin spoke out at the #NoMoreExcuses rally in Marion Square on Feb. 19 to bring awareness to increasing gun

violence. #NoMoreExcuses was the name of the rally to emphasize that action in legislation needs to be taken now without excuses.

After experiencing the December Code Red lockdown and connecting with Gallo, Martin said it was important to have a school-wide conversation, to stop postponing discussing the issue of gun violence in schools.

"My first year teaching was the year of Columbine, my daughter entered kindergarten the year of Sandy Hook and I feel that this year that circle has gotten closer and closer," Martin said. "I just ask for people to come together and look for a compromise."

Gallo spoke to the crowd about her personal experiences and connections to the shooting and about what she believes needs to be done.

"I know that if Alyssa or Alaina were still here, they would do the same thing if something happened to me and I just wanted to [speak out] for them," Gallo said. "I also just don't want to be silenced and want people to know that this needs to be fixed, and this needs to be changed."

Gallo does not want another 19 year old to have possession of semi-automatic weapon. Never again.

She will not stop. Not until school shootings are not normal dinner table talks, not until she sees legal progress, not until all students feel safe in their schools, not until she sees something -- anything -- change.