



Kelly Goddard /

Students and adults at Guilford High School participate in the national school walkout on March 14.

Guilford High School students join thousands protesting gun violence

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Next up, 'March For Our Lives' in D.C. on Saturday

By Lisa Reisman

GUILFORD — Before Jan. 31, it's safe to say, no one imagined roughly 700 students streaming out of Guilford High School, carrying signs, their chants ringing through the chilly air, on an otherwise quiet Wednesday

morning in mid-March. Or, for that matter, upwards of 50 members of the student body boarding a bus for Washington, D.C., this Saturday to take part in "March for Our Lives," a demonstration to demand stronger gun-control laws to end gun violence and mass

shootings in schools. "We'd seen it happen in other towns and other schools, but never to us," said freshman Lauren Walczyk, seated at a table in the basement of Guilford's First Congregational Church, making signs along with 30 of her classmates on the eve

of the National Student Walkout on March 14. Then came the shooting death of freshman Ethan Song on Jan. 31. "Our basketball team gathered together the day after everything happened," said freshman Emily Brouder, who was putting the finishing touches on a sign that read ARMS ARE FOR HUGGING.

"Before, the team was divided when it came to upperclassmen and lower classmen. But we all sat at the same table and we all talked about how we were feeling and what it meant." It was, she said, as if "someone flipped a switch." Of course, that kind of coming together in the face of tragedy might not be

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unusual. Nor, arguably, was the student-led effort to honor Ethan that followed.

"Someone came up with the idea that everyone wear red because that was his favorite color," Walczyk said. "We walked into school, and there was just this sea of red, coming together, flowing together."

What happened just two weeks later, though, was far from ordinary.

"We heard an announcement in the morning, our principal was recognizing everyone who had been killed in Florida and it was like another 17 Ethans dying," Walczyk said.

"I think right then and there we all just knew that something had to change, and we had to be part of that change."

Senior Tyler Felson, an organizer of the walkout, agreed.

"Sandy Hook was parents; Las Vegas and Orlando were adults, mostly," Felson said, as he arranged an assortment of completed posters on the far wall. "Those Parkland students were us. They are us. That's why it hit us all so hard, especially coming so soon after Ethan."

Hearing their peers publicly calling for an end to gun violence was a wake-up call. "It tapped into the sort of anger a lot of kids are feeling about where this country is headed," he said.

While Felson described student response to the walkout as overwhelming — approximately 70 percent of the students would participate — "by no means are we speaking for everyone," he said. "We totally respect any student who opts out of taking part."

Nor, he added, was the aim to take guns away from people. "I'm pro-gun control, but not anti-safety and anti-common sense."

Still, "as progressive as Connecticut's firearm provisions are, we need to tighten loopholes in existing laws that fail to prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands."

For senior Brendan O'Callahan, another organizer, the words of

Emma Gonzalez, the Stoneman Douglas senior who memorably called for gun control in a fiery 11-minute speech, struck a chord.

"You could just feel the anger radiating off her," he said. "You don't see many adults getting that fired up." For whatever reason, "most adults have gotten numb to the issue, to the change they can effect. We haven't."

For Charlotte Babbin, a senior, Parkland was a call to action. "The way their students spoke out helped us find our voices," she said. "Our administration was on board with having a walkout, but only as a memorial. Those students gave us permission to insist that the walkout be a call for policy change."

While "thoughts and prayers are nice," she said, "we need to demand a ban on assault weapons, on semi-automatic weapons. We need to make it a lot more difficult to get access to a gun."

To achieve those ends, said her sister Molly, will require not only walkouts and marches like the one planned on Saturday in D.C. It also will entail "keeping the conversation going, staying active on social media, and calling, emailing, sending letters to lawmakers."

According to Molly, there's another compelling reason that those lawmakers might think twice about dismissing their calls. "A lot of us are 18 or turning 18," she said. "The mid-term elections aren't that far off. If we can organize, we can be a powerful voting bloc."

Fourteen hours later, the crowd of students, led by Felson and O'Callahan, were advancing toward a group of parents gathered on the opposite side of New England Road, toting signs that read "Enough Is Enough" and "Am I Next?" and chanting "never again."

"We're with you," the parents shouted back. "Lead the way."

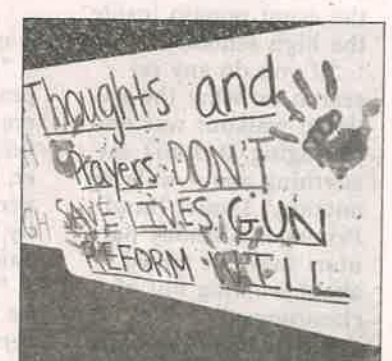
To help fund bus tickets for students traveling to Washington, D.C., for the Saturday "March for Our Lives" demonstration, visit gofundme.com/CTYOUTHODC.

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Kelly Goddard / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Above and below left, students and adults at Guilford High School on March 14 participate in the national school walkout.



Protest signs made by Guilford High School students at First Congregational Church on Broad Street in Guilford for the walkout on March 14.