

“Lost Class” Found: Columbine Survivors Discover New Purpose

Mark Piscotty/ NBC News

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Former Columbine High School students Jennifer Hammer, left, 33, of Commerce City, Co. and Heather Egeland, 32, of Littleton, Co. pose for a portrait at the Columbine Memorial. The two are co-founders of The Rebels Project, a support group that has helped survivors of other mass shootings around the country, from Virginia Tech to Chardon, Ohio to Newtown, Conn. On the day of the Columbine shootings in 1999 the two were huddled in the choir office with about 60 other students hiding from the shooters.

In July 2012, the Monday after a gunman opened fire on a crowded Aurora, Colo., movie theater, Jennifer Hammer tapped a text message to a friend. She'd spent the weekend watching the news, feeling angry and useless — not because she knew any of the dead or injured, but because it reminded her of the day she spent 13 years earlier, cowering in a music room in Littleton, Colo.'s Columbine High School, listening to two classmates massacre students.

She'd had the same reaction to other mass shootings. This one, though, was so close to home.

Sitting among the children at the day-care center where she taught, Hammer texted Heather Egeland, who'd hid in that music room with her.

“What do you think about starting a group of shooting survivors that can be available for victims?” Hammer typed.

Egeland responded immediately: “I’m in.”

That short exchange sent Hammer and Egeland on a journey to tend to the emotional injuries of survivors in Aurora and around the country. The project forced the two friends to confront old wounds of their own, and recognize, now 15 years after Columbine, that they still needed help themselves.

“We’re all part of this terrible family,” Hammer said. “So we might as well be there to comfort each other.”

Hammer, 33, and Egeland, 32, are members of the Columbine Class of 1999, the seniors who graduated just weeks after the April 20 attack, in which 12 students and one teacher were murdered in a 49-minute rampage that ended with the shooters, both seniors, killing themselves.

Thrust into adulthood, the graduates went to college or got jobs where they were expected to heal and move on. But for many of the “lost class,” as they are sometimes called, that never happened.



Former Columbine High School student Jennifer Hammer points to the choir group picture in her yearbook to fellow former student Heather Egeland at the Columbine Memorial on April 18. Marc Piscotty / for NBC News

“All you want to do is go back to how it was before,” Egeland said. “And we were offered the perfect opportunity: we didn’t have to go back and we didn’t have to talk about it ever again if we didn’t want to.”

Some succumbed to drug use or drinking, or tried suicide. Others dropped out of school, or struggled with spouses. Some, including Hammer, convinced themselves that they’d weathered the worst of it. Others, like Egeland, knew they hadn’t, but were ashamed to admit it.

Egeland enrolled in a local community college, and quickly failed out after encountering students and teachers who didn’t understand why fire drills rattled her or why she couldn’t write a paper on gun control. She worked in restaurants, where colleagues didn’t recognize why she so badly needed to go home on 9/11. Humiliated, she stopped telling people about her experience, and chastised herself for being a sissy. “Eventually, time just passed,” she said. “And I learned to cope with it – ish.”

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Hammer put off college, working in day care for a period she called her “year of rebellion.” The state offered therapy, which she stopped after two sessions because she didn’t think she needed it. Then she persuaded herself to get on with a career and family. She went to school, became a teacher, got married, had a son. “It was the whole, just, trying to live your life normally,” Hammer said.

Many members of the Class of 1999 — and younger survivors, too — were doing the same things. When they ran into each other, they felt a bond. But they didn’t get together formally until the 10-year anniversary of their graduation, when Principal Frank DeAngelis hosted a breakfast for them at the school.

For years, DeAngelis had expressed regret for not being able to take care of the seniors after they graduated. He’d urged everyone to get professional help, but the Class of 1999 left the nest too quickly. “A lot of these kids, and I still call them kids, didn’t get into counseling,” DeAngelis said. “I have parents now telling me, ‘I wished we had listened.’ Because now we’re paying the price, and they’re in their 30s.”

The breakfast was, for many, the first time they’d returned since the shooting. They brought their spouses and young children. DeAngelis welcomed them warmly. They hugged and laughed. They visited rooms where they hid from the shooters. They cried, a lot.



Columbine High School principal Frank DeAngelis in his office at Columbine High School. DeAngelis is retiring at the end of this school year after a 35-year career at the school as a teacher, coach and administrator. DeAngelis will have spent 18 years leading the school, driven in part by a personal pledge made after the attack that he would remain as principal until all the students in Columbine feeder schools at the time had graduated. He fulfilled that promise in 2012. Marc Piscotty / for NBC News file

Egeland realized afterward how important that event, the personal invitation to return, was to her. It made her feel like she mattered, and that she wasn't alone. From then on, instead of leaving town for the anniversary of the shooting, she began to invite other classmates to get together at the memorial at the edge of a park overlooking the school, or at a bar, or at someone's home. They just hung out and caught up on things, and the others appreciated the effort.

Then came the attack in the Aurora movie theater, just 20 miles from Columbine. For Hammer and Egeland and many of their classmates, it was like a cork had popped. The old feelings of anxiety and fear bubbled over.

Hammer had always wanted to do something for other survivors. A few months earlier, she'd recruited Egeland onto a letter-writing campaign for the people of Chardon, Ohio, which had just suffered a deadly high school shooting. This time, she wanted more.

On Aug. 1, 2012, 50 Columbine survivors packed into the sanctuary of Peace Mennonite Community Church in Aurora, just down the street from the movie theater. It was the first big meeting of The Rebels Project, which Hammer and Egeland created after that Monday morning text-message exchange. The goal of the group, named after the Columbine mascot, was to support the Aurora survivors, to help guide them through the treacherous months ahead.

The Columbine grads, many of whom were from the Class of 1999, arrived early, all wearing silver and blue Rebels gear. Egeland and Hammer encouraged them to share

whatever they wanted. They were nervous, but also relieved to be shaking off their feelings of helplessness.

The guests arrived, and the Rebels began telling their stories. One after another, they talked about how difficult it had been for them. Drugs, alcohol, suicide attempts. “The Columbine class was falling apart,” Egeland recalled. “They were sobbing, couldn’t complete their sentences. Couldn’t finish their stories because they were too busy crying.”

It was clear that the Aurora folks weren’t the only ones who needed help.

“It was a turning point for us, just seeing that,” Hammer said.

Classmates said they’d never realized how much pain they were still in, and how encouraging it was to know there were others in the same predicament. Some likened it to the missing piece of a puzzle. Others said they finally realized they needed therapy.

Hammer and Egeland organized more meetings: some for the Aurora survivors, others focused on the Columbine survivors. They created two private Facebook groups as extensions of those meetings. Among the guiding principles was that no one’s experience was any better or worse than the others’. Everyone was on equal ground.

They began spreading the word to other survivor communities, adding to the list as new mass shootings happened. They learned to focus their outreach efforts a few months after a shooting, when the attention began to wane and loneliness set in.

“Our goal is to sort of be there when everybody else has moved on,” Egeland said.

“It gives me an outlet and recognition that I’m not alone and that there are people out there who can help.”

The Rebels Project has hosted and organized a fundraiser for a charity, The Avielle Foundation, created by the father of Avielle Rose Richman, a 6-year-old killed in the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. They plan to visit Newtown this year as guests of local advocacy groups, the next step in what they hope will be more trips to survivor communities. Former classmates have formed a charity, Phoenix 999, that aims to raise money to help The Rebels Project travel.

“We can see ourselves after 20 years with Rebels Projects around the country, sent out to different locations to be support groups for people,” Hammer said.

Jeremy Richman, Avielle's father, has become close with Egeland and Hammer. He makes the Rebels Project Facebook page a part of his weekly routine, mostly to counsel others in discussions that can be brutally frank: he helps them along, but cautions that there is no way to ever truly “move on,” or fully heal.

“It gives me an outlet and recognition that I’m not alone, and that there are people out there who can help, and that I can help my healing process by helping others,” Richman, 44, said. “That ability to empathize, to listen and hear, makes us human, and I think it’s critical that we do that.”

Kim Blair Woodruff, who graduated Columbine in 2000, dealt with her emotional wounds by practicing tai chi. Through The Rebels Project, she invited Aurora survivors to join her. She now teaches many of them.

“My part of the project is to show them that peace is completely possible,” Blair Woodruff, 32, said. “It’s really hard, but it’s possible.”

The process remains a work in progress for the group's founders.

Egeland finished college in May 2013, and in August started teaching English in the Aurora Public Schools. She's given academic presentations about her experiences with The Rebels Project.

She admits to still being embarrassed talking about her deepest anxieties to people outside the community of survivors. But she can feel things coming together.

“Surprisingly, this year, I’m doing fantastic,” she said. “I keep myself really busy. So maybe it’s the focus.”

After many years as a day-care teacher, Hammer is now a librarian at the school her 7-year-old son attends. After Aurora, she started seeing a therapist so she'd feel strong enough to lead The Rebels Project. She thinks it's working.

“I wasn’t able to talk about it easily. But it has made such a huge difference because it brought out other feelings that I hadn’t felt in so long.”

Now, she said, she was beginning to feel "like myself again.