URGENCY AND FRUSTRATION: THE NEVER AGAIN MOVEMENT GATHERS MOMENTUM

The torpor of Tallahassee notwithstanding, the Parkland students have managed to force their agenda.

By Emily Witt  February 23, 2018

Six days after the Parkland school shooting, the student activists travelled to the state capitol to meet with one of the most pro-gun state legislatures in the country.

Photograph by Audra Melton / NYT / Redux

On Tuesday morning, the body of the sixteen-year-old Carmen Schentrup was laid to rest in an Episcopalian ceremony at the St. Andrew Church in Coral Springs, Florida. In his sermon, the Reverend Canon Mark H. Sims remembered Schentrup, who liked teal handbags and red lipstick, and who wrote notes on her piano sheet music to remind her where she had left off. At a nearby funeral home, a wake was being
prepared for the fifteen-year-old Peter Wang, who was also killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14th. The child of Chinese immigrants who owned a restaurant in West Palm Beach, Wang had wanted to join the military. His fellow J.R.O.T.C. members served as his pallbearers, and West Point posthumously granted him acceptance into the class of 2025.

On Tuesday afternoon, in a parking lot outside a Publix supermarket on Coral Ridge Drive, three white charter buses awaited the arrival of a hundred Stoneman Douglas students and their fifteen adult chaperones, who were travelling to the state capitol in Tallahassee to advocate for stricter gun-control laws. The students arrived carrying sleeping bags, pillows, and permission slips signed by their parents. The media besieged them with questions. A helicopter hovered overhead. Two women wearing the uniform of the nearby gas station stood next to one of the buses. I asked if they were parents. No, they said, but the students were their customers. “We know all of them,” one said, and they wanted to support them.

I approached a student in braids holding an overnight bag and sign that said “ENOUGH.” Her name was Tyra Hemans, and I watched her argue with a reporter about the likelihood that anybody in Tallahassee would change gun laws. “This law does not deserve to take lives anymore,” she insisted, without specifying a law. “It is a law that takes lives, it is a murderous law. It is a dirty law. I’m getting rid of the law.” After the reporter moved on, I asked why she was there. She told me about her friend Meadow Pollack, with whom she shared a birthday and a love of rap music.

Another student, a Never Again organizer named Chris Grady, stood to the side, observing the scene. A slim figure with curly hair, Grady, I had been told by other organizers, would be joining the Army after graduation. I asked if there was a contradiction between advocating for gun control and becoming a soldier. “Not at all,” he said. “These AR-15s, they’re weapons of war. Going to school, you’re not going to war, you’re trying to get an education.” After the Army, Grady wanted to pursue a career in politics. He admitted to feeling “apprehensive” about leaving behind the movement he’d helped galvanize when he ships out in June.

The organizer of the trip, the junior-class president, Jaclyn Corin, rushed between buses, holding lists that assigned seating, and turning down interview requests with an
in-motion “I can’t.” Small and blonde, she wore a Stoneman Douglas windbreaker, black leggings, and brown ankle boots.

The young activists had stayed up late yet again the night before, in their unofficial headquarters at the house of Cameron Kasky, a student co-founder of the Never Again movement. “I was with Jackie all night making these bus arrangements,” a junior named Dylan Redshaw said. “I was on my phone on Snapchat crossing off the names because [Cameron’s] printer is broken. It’s been broken for, like, five days.” Kasky was in the parking lot, too, wearing a Stoneman Douglas warmup jacket. He and Corin climbed up to the car to make announcements and offer advice.

“Guys, over the next couple of days there are a lot of people who are being paid a lot of money to ruin what we are doing,” Kasky said. “A lot of people with cameras here are here to help, and a lot of people with cameras here are here to destroy us and to keep the Second Amendment safe. First of all, we’re doing that, too. I want my dad to keep his guns. We’re just trying to just not let seventeen of us get shot in the fucking face again.”

“Amen!” someone yelled in the crowd.

The leaders of the Never Again movement had started attracting the derision of some members of the right wing. On Tuesday, in Florida, an aide to a Republican state representative was fired for e-mailing a reporter to float the theory that the student activists were paid actors. Kasky suspended his Facebook account because, he said, unlike Twitter, “there’s no character count, so the death threats from the N.R.A. cultists are a bit more graphic.” The student tried to joke about some of the more egregious social-media conspiracies: that their classmate David Hogg was an F.B.I. plant, or a twenty-six-year-old felon from California.

Corin called out the names of the students who belonged on each bus, and they boarded. Kasky embraced Corin and Grady in a three-way hug; Kasky was staying in South Florida, to coördinate a CNN town-hall meeting the following day. The photographers in the crowd moved their tripods to record the exit of the bus fleet, but the buses didn’t leave. The air-conditioner on one had failed. A replacement was ordered, causing a delay.
I stood and chatted with Paul Corin, Jaclyn Corin’s father, who had taken the day off work to wish the students goodbye. (Jackie’s mother, Maryleigh, was one of the chaperones.) “I’m staying to feed the dog,” Corin said. He and Maryleigh watched as Jaclyn ran between the buses, the lists still in her hand. She paused for a moment before her parents, tearing up in frustration. “It’s just that everybody’s depending on me,” she said to her dad. “You’re good,” he told her, with a pat on the arm. She rushed away again, climbing the steps of the malfunctioning bus, on which students were popping open the ceiling vents. The first two buses departed shortly before 2 p.m. The one with the broken air-conditioner was replaced just over an hour later. Corin rode on the last bus.

After the first two buses departed, I went to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The roads around it, which had been closed since the shooting, were now passable. The school is in fact a campus of several white buildings with red terra-cotta tile roofs. (The shooting had been in what students call the freshman building.) When I arrived, a small crowd of young people were milling around on the corner of Coral Springs Drive and Holmberg Road, some of them in black funeral wear, having come from funerals. An ambulance pulled up to treat a student who, apparently suffering from heat stroke, sat on the street corner. I walked up to a group of teen-age girls to ask what was going on. They were wearing maroon and white, the school colors of Stoneman Douglas, and it wasn’t until one student, a fifteen-year-old sophomore named Catherine Silva, started telling me why they were there that I realized that they were from another school, West Boca Raton High. That morning, Silva told me, their school had held a seventeen-minute silence for each of the students and staff members who had died in the shooting, after which a spontaneous protest had erupted: a thousand of the students had decided to leave school, and they had simply kept walking the twelve miles southwest to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

“Everyone started leaving the gates of the school, and people were trying to prevent us, like, assistant principals were trying to tell us, ‘No, no, no, go back,’ so we just stampeded through the gates,” Silva told me, a note of elation in her voice. “I think I was one of the first people who was, like, ‘We’re walking to Marjory, we’re walking to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. We’re going. We’re walking all the way there.’”
She gestured at the group of sunburned and sweaty teen-agers around her, some with their shirts off, some standing around talking with the Stoneman Douglas students in their funeral clothes. “We have to do this ourselves because, frankly, no one’s going to do this for us. I don't care if I have to lose my voice from screaming so loud because, apparently, I don’t have a voice anyway in the American justice system. I’ll just scream my lungs out until something is done. Change is necessary. We need change to be safe.”

As I spoke to Silva outside the school, and as the buses drove toward Tallahassee, Florida House Republicans blocked a motion to debate a ban on assault weapons in the state. They spent more time on the afternoon of February 20th debating a resolution to declare pornography a public-health risk.

By air in a puddle jumper from Fort Lauderdale, the approach to Tallahassee, at the eastern edge of the Florida Panhandle, is from the west, a descent over the humid green expanse of the Apalachicola National Forest. Tallahassee has Spanish moss, a columned historic state house, and southern accents. Six days after the shooting, the activists’ visit would mark their first major meetings with lawmakers—not just any lawmakers, but one of the most pro-gun state legislatures in the country.

A welcome ceremony had been arranged for the Stoneman Douglas students at a local school, Leon High. At 9:30 P.M., with word that the first bus was approaching the outskirts of Tallahassee, hundreds of students and staff from Leon stood on the front steps of the school, a W.P.A.-era building with a broad sloping lawn and a grand flight of stairs, ready to welcome their peers from Parkland. As the bus reached the driveway, the crowd grew silent. A teacher from Leon told me that they had been instructed to greet the students with the “subdued clapping” appropriate to the gravity of the moment, but, when the first Stoneman Douglas students stepped off the bus, some couldn’t suppress a few whoops. Accompanied by ushers from the Leon student-government association, the leaders of the Never Again movement ascended the steps with the air of visiting dignitaries, the other students following more bashfully behind them, a few breaking into tears at the sight of the (now gently) applauding crowd that flanked the stairs. They accepted hugs and Saran-wrapped chocolate-chip cookies baked by the children of the nearby Magnolia School, then delivered short speeches of thanks and recognition in English and in Spanish.
Since the first days of the movement, the media scrum had vastly grown, and the steps were filled with reporters querying students in French or German or British accents, often about the whereabouts of the student Emma González. (She had stayed in South Florida to organize.) The students had developed an attitude of greater aloofness with the reporters, the leaders in particular more adept at waving away outstretched microphones. The media horde was told to wait in the school library while the travellers recovered in the cafeteria, and only then were we given free rein to mingle, as the students ate pizza and candy and songs by Drake, Rihanna, and OneRepublic played through speakers.

The students had been coördinating their visit with Lauren Book, a Florida state senator who had, with the assistance of other state senators and staff, helped them organize meetings with Florida state legislators, as well as with the attorney general, Pam Bondi; and the governor, Rick Scott. Also roaming the cafeteria was Book’s father, Ron, a bald and pugilistic-looking figure in a suit and tie, well known in Florida for his forty-year career as a lobbyist. Lauren, who was wearing knee-high boots and a belted black dress with a pleated skirt, welcomed the students, and Ron talked about how lucky he was to work with his daughter. Then he hinted that the school shooting might offer a good opportunity to advocate for limiting Florida’s open-records laws, under which, he lamented, the addresses of the victims had been made available to the public after the shooting. (I had yet to hear a student mention this as a point of contention.) Claire VanSusteren, a staffer of Lauren Book’s, urged the students to be measured. Other students had travelled to the capitol from Parkland in other caravans that day, and, VanSusteren said, had met with legislators and “started getting in their faces and shooting with their cell phones,” resulting in cancelled meetings. By the time that Kevin Rader, a state senator, said, “I know it’s kind of intimidating,” I wondered if any of the adults in the room had noticed that what had gotten the students this far was not waiting for permission or playing politics as usual but a coherent message about gun control, the moral authority bestowed on them by tragedy and by their youth, and a refusal to conduct business as usual. Still, the students listened attentively.

In the mazelike halls of the capitol building the next morning, a shoeshine man made his rounds; gentlemen rushed to open doors for the ladies; and, while most of the legislators had the good sense to ignore the posters advertising February 21st as “Seersucker Day,” at least one full summer suit was worn in the chambers. The Florida
The state senate opened, as usual, with a prayer from the “chaplain of the day.” It was the first senate session since the shooting, and the chaplain, a rabbi, prayed, “Please, God, help us illuminate the darkness caused by the extinguishing of seventeen lives.” After the Pledge of Allegiance, the lights were dimmed, and a silent slide show played with the names and photos of the dead, bringing some of the Stoneman Douglas students in the galleries to tears again.

Jackie Corin sat in the front row of the balcony overlooking the chambers, next to her mother. Under Jackie’s leadership, the students had formed ten groups of ten, which, throughout the morning, would travel to meet with different legislators. I joined the group that went to meet with Rep. Alex Stark, of Broward County. Stark, a Democrat, agreed with the students’ demands for changes to existing gun laws, and he did most of the talking, reminiscing about the students who had organized to protest the war in Vietnam, fifty years before. He took a question from a student, who asked, “What are you going to do for the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas who have to go back to school?”

“I don’t even have an answer for you,” Stark said. “We have schools in the state that can’t afford student-resource officers,” he said, referring to the armed police officers in schools. He turned the discussion to strengthening the Baker Act, which allows for the involuntary examination of the mentally ill. As to the possibility that the Florida legislature would pass meaningful reforms to existing gun laws, he recalled a law known as the “Pop Tart bill,” which prohibits disciplining students from playing with simulated weapons. Governor Scott signed the bill into law in 2014, after a boy in Maryland was suspended for biting a Pop Tart into the shape of a gun. “This is what we’re dealing with here,” Stark said.

By midday, at a planned press conference, a few of the students were showing signs of impatience. The second speaker, Ryan Deitsch, whose spiky red hair stuck out in crowds, had not prepared anything to say. Fortunately, he said, “I am the president and founder of the M.S.D. improv club, so, hopefully, I can get something in.” He described being amazed by his own classmates. “For the longest time, I’ve only perceived Douglas as just a school of entitled children and those who Juul,” he said, referring to a brand of electronic cigarettes. “Now I’m left seeing that these are powerful speakers.” What was disappointing to him today, he continued, had been the grownups. “The legislature,
those in power, have not taken action. They’ve been using their words and using political double talk as much as they can, and it’s not a weapon that I want them to be able to use anymore. They can walk around any question they want, but the more they don’t act, the more they don’t deserve to be in office.” He pointed out that he was a senior, recently of legal voting age. “I want to see those people who shot down that bill, who did not let it get past committee,” he said. “I’m not here for a fight. I’m not here to argue with you. I just want to speak. I just want to see your face and know why.”

The more time one spent in the state legislature, the more it seemed a place of gestures and symbols, from the honorary plaques that lined the representatives’ walls to the hand-sanitizer stations hung at regular intervals for post-handshake decontamination. The balconies of the rotunda, where the press conference was held, were adorned with Florida miscellanea (“Orange state fruit,” “Orange Juice state beverage,” “Porpoise state saltwater mammal,” “Manatee state marine mammal”). As the students spoke, at a podium facing a line of cameras, legislators stood behind them wearing the same fixed smiles that I had been seeing on the Olympic figure skaters on television in the evenings. While some of the students felt satisfied that their voices had been heard in the meetings, others spoke of cancelled appointments, and of one legislator arriving almost an hour late. Governor Scott, however, kept his word to meet with the students, although he did so behind closed doors.

At another meeting, a junior named Casey Sherman asked Manny Díaz, Jr., a Republican representative from Miami-Dade County, about the possibility of arming teachers. She worried it might put more student lives at risks, or that teachers could not be trusted “to handle the gun properly and not harm themselves.” Díaz said that he was not talking about teachers but, rather, “personnel that’s deputized and highly trained,” he said. “Like an air marshal.” (The armed police officer assigned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had stood outside the building during the shooting, and has since resigned from his job.)

Between meetings, the students were led to the House of Representatives gallery to pass the time. They watched as legislators passionately discussed House Bill 839, about the display of the state motto in schools; House Bill 7051, “An Act Relating to Trust Funds”; and a resolution to recognize Dominican-American Heritage Day. The audience was asked to stand and applaud a legislator’s daughter who had made the
maroon remembrance ribbons that many of the lawmakers wore pinned to their lapels. As discussion turned to House Bill 7043, “Dredge and Fill Permitting Program,” I overheard Chris Grady lean over to Ryan Deitsch and whisper something. They stood up and left.

Outside in the hall, the students vented. “This is a practice run,” David Hogg, a senior at Stoneman Douglas, said later. He had just flown in after making an appearance in Los Angeles on the “Dr. Phil” show. As we spoke, he asked if we could go over to the balcony so he could lean against it. “If we can get this done at the federal level, this doesn't even matter.” The torpor in Florida notwithstanding, the students had managed to force the agenda. By the end of the week, Marco Rubio, Donald Trump, and Governor Scott had suggested banning bump stocks and raising the age at which an adult can buy a gun, from eighteen to twenty-one. (Twenty-one is the national minimum age at which a person can buy a handgun but not an assault rifle.)

Throughout the day, the students had been following on their phones the course of a massive protest being held outside the capitol building. In the early afternoon, the rotunda slowly filled. Most of the protesters were young, carrying signs that read “NRA Bribes < Student Lives,” “Kids > Guns,” and, simply, “Help.” They began yelling “Be ashamed,” then “Vote them out,” then “Not one more.” Upstairs, several leaders of the Never Again movement looked almost too tired to notice. Hogg received a phone call from NPR before his phone died. Ryan Deitsch and Delaney Tarr looked over the balcony with mild curiosity. Chris Grady sat alone on the bench of a piano pushed against the wall and stared into space. In an hour, the leaders of Never Again, including Grady, Hogg, and Tarr, would board a plane back to South Florida, where, later that night, I watched them on television debating Senator Rubio and Dana Loesch, a spokeswoman for the N.R.A. The rest of the students would return home by bus. Classes would resume at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School the following week. Downstairs, the protesters chanted, “The students, united, will never be defeated,” as a handful of capitol workers in suits looked on.

“You work for us. You work for us,” the protesters yelled toward the closed doors of the House chamber.

Emily Witt is the author of “Future Sex.” Read more »
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Within days of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, a group of students had organized to advocate for change.