

AMERICAN ICON



Wind chimes that Evelyn's late mother hung from the tree still tinkle in the breeze outside their home. But loud noises startle and scare her, even when she's surrounded by friends — a symptom of the trauma she experienced. When Evelyn and her dad go to the cemetery, they have nine graves to visit. "She's a good girl and she makes my heart happy and I try to keep her happy too," Holcombe said. Holcombe smells his late wife's robe, willing her scent to return to the fabric.



'I've normalized pain. ... I'll never be normal again'

TRAGEDY FROM A1

John Holcombe and his now-12-year-old daughter, Evelyn, cling to each other for support. His pregnant wife, Crystal, had shielded Evelyn from the gunman and was killed along with Evelyn's three siblings and grandparents.

Some of the survivors have moved away from Sutherland Springs. Some have contemplated suicide. The physical impact of the bullets and the number of lives lost were magnified by the shooter's chosen weapon. Devin Patrick Kelley, wielding a Ruger AR-556 rifle, fired 450 military-grade bullets inside the church within minutes, all of which left the barrel at a velocity of around 3,200 feet a second.

The devastation was incomparable to damage from a handgun or shotgun. Doctors who treated the victims likened the wounds to something they might have seen on a battlefield.

"The high-velocity firearm injuries, when they come in, you're missing body parts, and there's bleeding," said Lillian Liao, a trauma surgeon at University Hospital and UT Health in San Antonio. "You don't see muscle. There's just bone and skin and missing parts."

Five years on, many in the working-class town of 600 — nestled in the dusty-road countryside an hour southeast of San Antonio — still attend services every Sunday. They pray in a new church built next to the old one. The sanctuary, funded by dona-

tions from around the country, has fortified walls and security cameras. Many of the congregants — in addition to those in the church's new security team — carry guns on their hips for protection.

Every Sunday, they chime a bell in the church's tower where 25 portraits of those lost hang high, along with an image of angels to honor Crystal's unborn child. Children hobble through the pews with leg braces, men carry colostomy bags that sometimes leak. Some, like Workman, are marked by sprays of odd-looking freckles.

In the years since the shooting — years of weekly doctor's appointments, therapy to cleanse her blood and severe bouts of depression — Morgan Workman has been, in the words of a coworker, "an island of hope in a sea of despair." She clings to that. Not because she believes it to be true, but out of hope that one day it could be.

"I want to be the person that's happy and positive even if they're struggling. I want to be smiling even if I'm having a really hard day. I want to find what's good in the day," Workman said. "But some days, the birds, the breeze — that's all you can find."

'It looked like a bomb went off'

As David Colbath's blood pooled on the church's red carpet, as his friends were shot and killed around him — he thought of his children, and his savior.

Eyes shut, he recalled whisper-



"I have three [doctor's visits] scheduled this week and it's five years out," Morgan Workman said as she receives treatment for lead poisoning from the bullet fragments that remain embedded in her body. Workman cradles her emotional support dog, Lux, whom she adopted last year. Workman takes dozens of pills every day to manage her symptoms.

ing again and again: "I love you Morgan, I love you Olivia, I love you Jesus."

The first gunshots sounded like fireworks.

On the lawn, 26-year-old Kelley — clad in body armor, his face concealed by a mask of the Marvel character the Punisher — was firing his rifle at the outside walls and front door of the tiny church.

Colbath was one of the first people to be hit, catching a glimpse of the shooter from the church entranceway before his arm was shot. "Get down!" he recalled screaming. "Get on the floor!"

As parishioners ducked for cover, Kelley stormed the church and stalked the aisles, shooting people at point-blank range. He fired 196 times inside the church in 16 separate bursts, according to a report based on recovered bullet casings and analysis of a church video. The dead ranged from age 1 to 77.

Terry Snyder, a longtime Texas

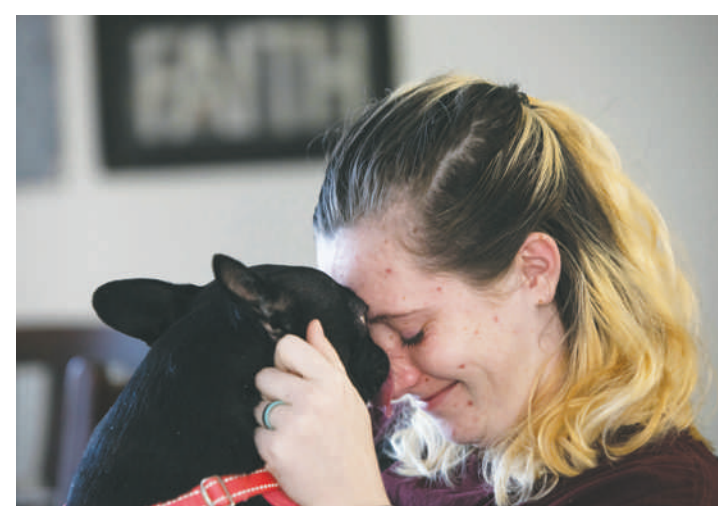
Ranger among the first on the scene, later described seeing victims where bullets had "disintegrated the skull" — including a toddler's. Testifying in a civil trial, Snyder twice choked up on the witness stand.

"Even the survivors, the wounds that I saw ... it was unbelievable, just the damage that the bullet would cause," Snyder said.

In testimony as part of a lawsuit against the U.S. Air Force for failing to report Kelley's criminal history to the FBI, John Holcombe described the horror he saw when he emerged from the sound booth.

"The kids were just laying there piled up with their faces blown off," Holcombe testified. "I couldn't even see [Crystal's] beautiful face anymore. It was just a crater."

Rusty Duncan, a paramedic from a neighboring town who happened to be driving by and was one of the first responders to



enter the church, recalled "walking into a war zone where everyone was already dead."

"It looked like a bomb went off in there," Duncan said. "Just pieces of people everywhere."

Kelley fled the scene and killed himself hours later. Police later said they believe the gunman was targeting some relatives who attended the church because of an ongoing "domestic situation." One of the relatives, his mother-in-law, Michelle Shields, was not at church that day, but her mother, Lou White, was. She was killed.

'It would be better if I had gone'

The past is so precious to Holcombe that he has frozen time.

A wastebasket filled with Crystal's crumpled papers and empty Dr Pepper cans still sits on one side of his bed. He's kept a foam Polar Pop cup, lid and straw intact; it was the last drink she sipped on. The registry for the baby they never had is still online.

"One of the most important things we have is time," he said on a recent afternoon. "I regret not spending more time with the rest of my family when they were



here. That's something I can never get back."

Holcombe lost both of his parents in the attack. His brother and niece were also killed. Only Evelyn, his youngest daughter, and Philip, his oldest son, survived.

Holcombe wasn't shot, but fragments of shrapnel were lodged in his back and picked out later at the hospital. Evelyn, 7 at the time, was saved by her mother, who threw herself on top of her.

Holcombe has never stopped questioning why he survived instead of the other members of his

family. "It would be better if I had gone and Crystal would've stayed," he said.

He can't dwell for too long. He has an energetic, wild-haired middle-schooler to feed and entertain and put to bed every night. Evelyn pulls him into the present in the moments when he smells Crystal's purple robe for too long, willing her scent to return to the fabric.

"Daddy, grab my feet!" she called to him on a recent afternoon, interrupting him as he examined the faint crayon writings of Megan and Emily, her deceased

sisters, on the living room blinds. Evelyn lay on a blue blanket on the living room floor, her blond hair splayed around her as she pushed her feet out into the air so that he could pull her around like a human mop.

"Woo hoo!" she said as he did. Soon, Philip would come home from work and be her next target for attention.

Later, John confessed: "If they weren't here and it was just me — I would be gone."

Evelyn loves Subway sandwiches that ooze with mayo and bounding on her trampoline in

the backyard. Her mind wanders quickly from subject to subject.

But she can talk almost encyclopedically about mental health and depression.

"People don't know how to handle their depression," Evelyn said on a recent afternoon. "Depression isn't just a feeling, and you can't just snap out of it. It's like ... a hatred that's sucking inside of you and you have no happiness, no joy, and you don't know what to do, you're lost."

After losing three siblings and her mother, she struggles to imagine herself as an adult.

About the terminology: Colt acquired the AR-15 patent and trademark from Armalite in 1959. The patent expired, leaving many companies to produce their own weapons, commonly called AR-style rifles. While Colt still holds the trademark, "AR-15" has become a ubiquitous term for a popular style of gas-operated, magazine-fed semiautomatic rifles. For this reason, we refer to the rifle broadly as the AR-15 in this series.

When John was explaining that he saved Evelyn's Hello Kitty playhouse — a gift from her mother — because she might want it when she gets older, Evelyn interjected. "I don't think I'll grow up," she said.

She shivers at loud noises. When Evelyn attended a church sleeperover on a recent Friday with a handful of other girls, she ran up to another parishioner who survived the shooting and cupped her hands over her ears

silently, her eyes pleading: She wanted earmuffs to dull the sounds of the other girls' loud screaming.

'I've normalized pain every night'

Colbath was shot nine times in the arm, leg and back.

He recalled needing six surgeries in the weeks after the shooting, as doctors decided which bullet fragments to remove, and which were buried so deep they were better left inside him. In the years since, bullets were also removed from his left side and back.

When he returned home from the hospital, Colbath could no longer do simple tasks independently. He had to submit to being cared for and asking for help, his family and health-care workers tasked with changing the bandages covering gruesome wounds on his buttocks and back.

One of his arms is numb, with a chunk of flesh cut out from his forearm and knotted skin stretching across it. The other hand is hypersensitive, with frequent nerve pain and uncomfortable sensations at the slightest touch. His ankles have scars from bullet wounds and are often swollen, preventing him from standing too long. His lead levels are above average, he said.

Colbath, now 61, gained more

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