

Solemn Event Marks Anniversary of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shootings

Following the mass shooting tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Parkland, Fla., on February 14, 2018, MSD alumni and University of Miami students gathered at a campus-held vigil and relied on each other for support. One of the alumni, Alexander Margetts, a neuroscience student at UM, remembers feeling powerless – the tragedy had taken 17 lives in a place close to his heart.



Exhibits inside tents told the stories of various mass shootings.

“I knew that I had to do something to keep this kind of loss of life from happening in any other community,” Margetts said.

Two days after the shooting, Margetts, who is also a research assistant at The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, began planning for an event to memorialize the victims and spread awareness about the effects of gun violence. He spoke with other MSD alumni at the vigil and realized there were many who also felt passionate about creating such an event.

After connecting with additional students, Margetts assembled a 15-member executive board to plan and raise funds for the event. Margetts and Cathy De Freitas, a senior and vice president of Student Government, were named co-presidents, with Gabriela Nahous, a senior, also a founding member. Six of the executive board members were MSD graduates.

The goal was to create an event similar to “Tunnel of Oppression” – a student-designed multimedia exhibit that challenged people’s views on topics dealing with oppression – but to use tents to form a more closed-in environment. The closed-in space would make the attendees experience the inability to escape, similar to what the victims of the tragedies felt. Each tent would also contain pictures, videos, recordings, and statistics related to various mass shootings.

“We wanted the tents to really have an impact on people,” De Freitas said. “Seeing the videos and hearing the recordings would make people feel. The more they felt, the more they could

understand the situation.”

After a year of hard work, “This Is America – Mass Shooting Memorial Event,” co-sponsored by the Miller School’s Department of Public Health Sciences, opened on April 22. It attracted 468 students, faculty and staff to the Student Complex Center, where it was held.

Attendees began their self-guided journey in the introduction room, followed by eight tents, and finally the reflection room, where they talked about the event and their experiences with gun violence. In the reflection room, 150 attendees also signed up to join non-profit organizations and 70 signed a petition to ban assault weapons in the state of Florida.

The tents represented the tragedies that had taken place at MSD, as well as the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, Fla., Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., and the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pa.

“The Sandy Hook tent really hit me hard. I am from Long Island, which is right across from where Newtown is. I remember that day like it was yesterday, so walking inside that tent was very tough,” said Josh Dinetz, a media management student and vice chair of Hurricane Productions.

“We had to wear headsets inside each of the tents, which made the experience more riveting and emotional,” said David Lee, Ph.D., professor and graduate programs director in the Department of Public Health Sciences.

George Garcia, M.D., a UHealth trauma surgeon and Army veteran who attended the event with Dr. Lee, was invited to speak. He shared with other attendees the effects bullets have on the human body, his experiences at UM Jackson Memorial Hospital's Ryder Trauma Center, how he copes with operating on gunshot victims, and the effects of gun violence on both victims and family members.

"I appreciated his emotional honesty when speaking with the group about how these things impact him personally," Lee said.

While the executive board initially expected that fundraising for the event would be a challenge, it was an easier process than they had imagined. Once Margetts and De Freitas began meeting with potential sponsors, many departments and organizations within and outside the University contributed, including UM's Butler Center for Service and Leadership.

"It is important that our students have the ability to create programs and events that they are passionate about and have been affected by personally," said Andrew Wiemer, director of programs at the Butler Center. "These events also allow the faculty, staff and students to be further educated on these issues, while also honoring the victims of these mass shootings."

Other sponsors included the Student Government, Hurricane Productions, University of Miami Hillel, University of Miami Association of Greek Letter Organization, the University of Miami Master of Public Administration program, UMTV, ECO Agency,

and The David Project.

After the great response, and with a passion to continue making a difference, the executive board hopes to hold the event again next year.

“Gun violence is a public health issue,” Nahous said. “Regardless of what stance people take, it’s an issue that needs to be resolved and we hope to continue to raise awareness.”