



NORTH AMERICA 14 FEBRUARY 2019

## Life after Parkland

Athletic director Chris Hixon died in the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school. As a nation watched, his wife Debbi had to find a way to grieve.

BY DEVON HEINEN

**A**s the long, black limo continued up Florida's Turnpike, Debbi Hixon was in a fog. She had tuned out the cars that had pulled over to make way for the procession and its police motorcade. Debbi would later burn the black dress she was wearing that February day in 2018; she would never want to see it again. But first, she had to bury her husband.

*How the heck did this happen?*

It was a question she kept asking herself as the limo made its way to South Florida National Cemetery. Seven days earlier, Chris Hixon was murdered by a gunman in an attack that stopped the United States in its tracks. News networks continued coverage for hours. People went online, searching for more information and to share their shock, grief and condolences for the victims and their loved ones.



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Rain had given way to a brief stretch of overcast skies as the procession pulled into the cemetery. A bagpiper clad in a kilt soon started playing “Going Home”, breaking the silence as Chris’s casket, draped in an American flag, was brought out of the hearse.

The media was there. So was the military. Students, too. Lots of them. Members of the Patriot Guard Riders – a nationwide volunteer organisation, largely made up of motorcycle riders, that attends funerals of fallen military veterans and first responders – in their black leather motorcycle vests solemnly held American flags as a reverend spoke. One hundred, maybe even 200, people had showed up that afternoon.

Off to the side, gunshots began tearing through the calm. Fear rippled. A number of high schoolers quickly dropped to the ground. Everything was okay, though; just a 21-gun salute. It rattled Debbi, too.



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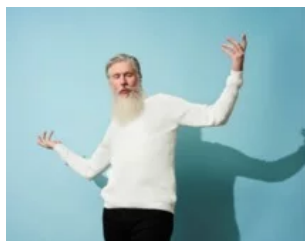
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*God, let that be over fast.*

Debbi soon got her wish. But her life would never be the same.



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Tucked away on North Golf Drive, a quiet street in the city of Hollywood, Florida, sits a cozy ranch-style house from the 1950s. It's not quite yellow – more yellow-orange. This is Debbi Hixon's home. In fact, it's the home she grew up in.

“There are memories in here that, when I'm having a bad day or whatever, you know, you remember something with your parents that brings you comfort that you wouldn't have somewhere else,” Debbi says. “I, personally, could never live anywhere else”

Debbi was born in December 1966. She's 5ft4 with straight, shoulder-length, auburn-and-grey hair. Usually, you can find sunglasses or reading glasses resting on her head and, when she doesn't have to dress up, Kino flip-flop sandals on her feet. She loves her flip-flops. She says she has a pair in every color.

Debbi is outgoing and determined. Eighties music is her jam. Billy Joel, Madonna, Bon Jovi.



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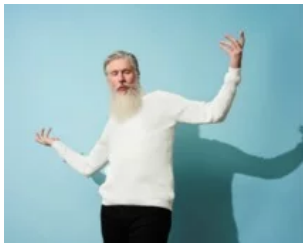
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She attended South Broward High School. There, she was on the swim team before graduating in 1984. She stayed in Florida for college, attending Florida State University and graduating in 1989.

A year before she finished at FSU with degrees in biology and education, she met her future husband. Chris Hixon was two years into a six-year stint in the Navy when he drove from where he was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, down to Florida for a wedding. He was friends with the groom. Debbi got an invite, too.

The first time Debbi and Chris met was at the rehearsal. “I thought, ‘Oh, what a geek, he’s so nerdy,’” Debbi remembers with a chuckle. “He just had this sauntering, bouncy walk about him.”



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There was a lot going on that night at the rehearsal. She didn’t know anything about Chris; he was just some random guy in jeans and a T-shirt. Debbi didn’t pay much attention to him.

The next day, though, was different.

Chris sat by himself at the reception. Aside from the groom, who was also in the Navy and stationed in Norfolk with the USS San Diego, Chris didn't know anybody. Debbi felt bad and decided to ask Chris to dance. Soon, the two were talking. They hit it off, and Debbi wanted to know if Chris would be interested in going somewhere after the wedding. She was 21, and found out Chris wasn't old enough to go anywhere. He was only 20.

Instead, they headed to a nearby beach with a six-pack of beer. It was late, maybe 11PM, but they didn't let that cut things short. Chris was funny, and quickly made Debbi feel at ease. The two talked well into the night. Debbi couldn't help but think about how much they had in common. Plus, Chris reminded her of her late father. Both were Navy men, family oriented, patriotic and loyal.

"I just remember thinking, 'This is the one. This is who I'm going to end up marrying,'" Debbi says. "I would have married him that night."

After dating for a year, Chris and Debbi were engaged. A year later, in 1990, they got married.

Only a few months had come and gone since their summer wedding when Debbi's mother suffered a ruptured aneurysm. Debbi had been living at home with her; Chris was gone with the Navy. Two years later, after time in a hospital and at a rehab facility, Debbi's mother returned home until she died of pneumonia in 1995 aged 63. Debbi stayed. In 1992 – when he transitioned from active-duty after six years in the Navy to the Navy reserve for what would end up being an additional 21 years of service – Chris moved into his wife's childhood home. They never moved away.

The health of Debbi's mother was an unforeseen challenge, but it wasn't the last they'd face.

Corey Hixon was born in July of 1995. He was Chris and Debbi's second son, following Thomas Hixon three years earlier. Corey was born with a rare genetic disorder called Kabuki syndrome. Because of the disorder, Corey is shorter in stature. It made his ears sit lower on his head. It caused his palate to be high and arched, his fingers short and stubby. It rendered his IQ low. Now 23, he has roughly the mental capacity of an eight-year-old.

Corey was also born without the left side of his heart. He had nine open-heart surgeries before he turned eight. That's not all. He also had Grade four bleeds on both sides of his brain at birth. Those lasted a couple of weeks.



Health wasn't the only issue that the Hixons encountered. Money was a problem, too.

Soon after transitioning from active-duty to the reserves, Chris got a job at Broward County Public Schools. It was the same school district Debbi worked in. She was a teacher. He started off in maintenance; mainly building ramps and stairs for portable classrooms.

Two or three years later, in the mid-1990s, Chris switched to an unarmed security monitor role in the district, first at Blanche Ely High School, then South Broward High School. He also became an athletic director, and would go on to work both jobs at the same time. In May of 2013 he moved to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Chris didn't make much working security, and made only \$8,000 each year extra from his side job as athletic director. At South Broward, Chris filled in when a team needed a coach and couldn't find one. Because he was the athletic director, filling in as a coach didn't net him any extra pay. He just did it. And when he was at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, he continued filling in. Over the years, he stepped in and took the reins of a volleyball team, a

junior varsity soccer squad and a cross-country crew. Chris also coached wrestling at Stoneman Douglas as the school's regular head coach. That, too, was for free. In all, Debbi says, Chris annually earned, on average, two-thirds of what she made each year as a teacher.

"We struggled," Debbi admits. "We struggled a lot."

The Hixons remained a close family. When Chris became an athletic director at South Broward, Debbi and their kids would go to the school's athletic events in order to spend time together. Eventually, Tom, the oldest son, would help out at them, too.

As long as Chris didn't get home too late, dinners were eaten as a family. Even after starting at Stoneman Douglas, which meant a longer commute home, breaking bread together was a must when possible.

Chris was a very involved parent, excited to have sons. He coached Tom in tee-ball. Sports are what Tom and Chris bonded over. Chris also coached Corey, in Special Olympics.



Tom was grown, a college graduate and moved out, when Corey and Chris started a tradition in early 2017. At least twice a month on Saturdays, Corey and Chris would run about two miles



to a donut shop. Literally, run. Chris had been a runner in high school, and he'd use the trips to the donut shop as motivation for his youngest son to get some exercise. Given all of his challenges, it was an opportunity for Corey to feel accomplished and good about himself. At the shop, they'd grab 12 donuts and one pistachio muffin for the family before walking home.

This routine was special. It wasn't just a way to get in a workout and chow down on a sweet treat. By then, Chris had been working at Stoneman Douglas for a few years. Time with Corey wasn't as frequent anymore.

"Those Saturdays were really important to [Corey] because that was his daddy time," Debbi says.

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The first shot was fired at 2:21PM EST. It was February 14, 2018. The location: Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

"Seventeen Juliett Three," the Broward Sheriff's Office dispatcher started calling out over the radio just under two minutes later. "Seventeen Bravo Three. Seventeen Bravo Fo—"

Seventeen Juliett Three was the sheriff's deputy stationed at the school at the time, Scot Peterson.

"Copy. Juliett Three," Peterson replied, cutting her off. The radio was scratchy. "Be advised, we have possible, uh – could be firecrackers. I think we got shots fired. Possible shots fired. Twelve-hundred building."

An alert tone sounded over the radio.

"Attention all units in District 15: Possible shots fired at Five-Nine-Zero-One Pine Island Road at Stoneman Douglas High School," the dispatcher calmly said to the channel. "Possible shots fired at Stoneman Douglas High School."

It was now 2:23. Authorities were responding, but it was too late. Nikolas Cruz, then 19 years old and a former Marjory Stoneman Douglas student who'd later confess to perpetrating what was unfolding, was wreaking havoc in the 1200 building. Using a semi-automatic AR-15 rifle, Cruz was in the process of shooting and killing 14 students and three adults, and injuring 17 others. The shooting would last about seven minutes before Cruz discarded his weapon and slipped away from the scene.

“Gary, does he know where the shooter is?” someone asked over the radio. Cruz eventually was found and arrested later that day.

About 30 miles south at South Broward High School, Debbi didn't know what was going on at her husband's school – at least, not at first. For her, it was just Wednesday. Ash Wednesday. Valentine's Day.

Her day started off like it usually did: hectic.

The original plan Debbi had was to go to Mass that morning with Corey. But Chris coaxed them into a last-minute change. He wanted to go as a family that night. Chris even said he'd call ahead if work ended up derailing things; that way, Debbi and Corey could go without him.

With the new schedule agreed, the discussion had switched to the gifts that sat on the dining room table. Corey insisted on exchanging Valentine's Day presents right then, right there. His father was often late home from work, Corey argued, and might not be able to stop at home before going to Mass that night: let's do presents now. The parents relented. Chris had gotten his wife gold hoop earrings. Debbi gave her husband a jumbo-sized bag of peanut M&M's; Chris loved peanut M&M's. As for Corey, he got candy, too.

Then, just before everyone left the house, Chris and Debbi kissed goodbye. Have a great day, they told each other.

School at South Broward got out at 2:40PM that day. Debbi was in her second year as an administrator at the school, the same one she attended as a teenager and where she had also taught science. She had just picked Corey up from his adult day facility and returned to South Broward with him before spending a few minutes in her office prior to a 3PM meeting. Television often quietly played in the background on Debbi's computer – it gave her something to listen to during the day while she worked – and since she had some time on her

hands until the meeting, she decided to pull up her internet browser and watch a little “General Hospital.”

A local news station cut into the show. That’s when she first heard about the shooting.

Instantly, Debbi was dialling her husband’s phone. The call was picked up. Chris was okay, she thought.

“Christopher, what the hell is going on?” she asked.

But Chris wasn’t on the line with her. It was then—Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School security specialist Kelvin Greenleaf. “No, no,” Greenleaf replied. “He’s coming.”

Debbi thought Greenleaf was talking about her husband. Greenleaf wasn’t. He was referring to then-Stoneman Douglas assistant principal, Jeff Morford, who was handed the phone. Shots had been fired, Morford told Debbi, and he didn’t know where Chris was. “I have to go,” Morford said. He hung up.

Debbi was right back on the phone. This time, she called her eldest son, Tom, who was in the Marine Corps and stationed in Hawaii. No luck, voicemail. But Tom called back moments later and reassured Debbi: everything was probably fine. Chris was probably being worked on at a hospital. Debbi just needed to try to stay calm and positive, her son told her, adding that he was on his way from Hawaii.

Debbi went to her 3PM meeting and lasted five minutes or so before getting told to leave. At that moment, a meeting wasn’t important. Finding out what was going on at Stoneman Douglas was.

People were already at Debbi’s house when she and Corey got there, including Chris’s mother, who normally lived in Pennsylvania but was staying with the Hixons for a while. Then more people came. And more. And more. And more.

Texts flooded into Debbi’s phone. Others checked in to see if Chris was okay. At some point, somebody took the phone away.

Information was non-existent. Though that didn’t stop people from trying to get it. The Hixons’ living room had become a hive of activity as folks tried fruitlessly to gather what they

could. As the afternoon gave way to evening, Debbi spent most of her time in a mental fog, parked on the long, brown living room couch. Eyes fixed on the television, she searched for her husband amid TV coverage of the carnage. If she could just see him on the screen, she'd have a better idea of what she should do.

On the screen, the station kept playing one short video clip over and over: a person on a stretcher. Male. Bigger than a student. But, otherwise, unidentifiable. "It wasn't until a month later I realised that we were looking at him on the stretcher, but I didn't realise it was him – they had cut off his pants, so he was in his underwear, and I was looking for the clothes he was wearing that day," Debbi says, referring to Chris's blue jeans and Stoneman Douglas polo shirt. "So, I missed it completely."

Although she knew nothing, Debbi thought Chris was in surgery – somewhere. She wanted to be there when he came out of the operating room. But no hospitals were calling her. She thought Chris had an ID card with him. He didn't, though. His wallet must have fallen out of his pocket at some point that day. It was found in his car.

*Why is nobody calling me?* The thought kept playing on repeat in Debbi's head. Finally, around 7:30PM, someone's phone rang with news. On the other end was Alan Strauss, a Broward County public school district employee like Debbi and Chris, and a friend. Strauss told Debbi that Chris had been shot and she needed to get to the Marriott Hotel in Coral Springs for more info.

Rolling into the Marriott at around 8:30PM, Debbi was still hopeful that her husband was alive. Six hours had passed since the shooting.

The Marriott "was a clusterfuck. That's exactly what it was," she says. "It was torture. The best way to describe that was just torture, because they didn't know what they were talking about. We were hoping for something positive; you're getting text messages from people, condolences for your loss; you don't know what to think. It was – it was just a nightmare."

Hours passed. Debbi and others, for the most part, camped out in a large room there at the hotel. Three times, Debbi was broken out and taken with a small group into a nearby room. There, they were questioned. Whether asked by the FBI or the Broward Sheriff's Office, the questions were always the same.

Back in the large waiting room, Debbi watched as sheriff's office personnel ate pizza in their tactical gear. It seemed like they were waiting to receive orders. They just stood around and talked with each other. Asked questions by the people corralled in that room, the personnel didn't have answers. It felt to Debbi that these "authorities" didn't have a purpose; that they were just hanging out, as if on a meal break.

By 10PM, it started sinking in: they were all there because a loved one was murdered at Stoneman Douglas.

Around midnight, Debbi had had enough. She needed to get out of there and find out what had happened to her husband. She stopped a Major in the BSO and told the official she knew Chris had been shot and hospitalised. What she didn't know, she told the Major, was whether or not Chris was in surgery or if he had even survived. The reply was direct: if Debbi knew Chris was hospitalised, go.

The emergency room at Broward Health North in Pompano Beach was a ghost town when Debbi got there and was presented another roadblock. A nurse at the reception desk told Debbi to go to the Marriott.

Hell no. She wasn't leaving.

"At that point, I knew. I just knew," Debbi recalls. "I just started yelling: 'He's either in your morgue or at the coroner's office. I want to know where he is. I want to see him.'"

An hour after arriving at the hospital, Debbi finally got the information she was looking for. A BSO officer took her into a room. The officer apologised for having to be the one telling her, adding that the officials back at the Marriott were supposed to. Chris was dead.

There were still a good number of people at Debbi's house when she got home from the hospital sometime after 2:30AM. 12 hours had passed since the shooting. The first person Debbi told the news to was her mother-in-law. Soon, Corey was awake and in the living room with his mother and grandmother. He knew something had happened at Stoneman Douglas and that they hadn't been sure about what had happened to his father.

Corey threw up his arms. "Where is he?"

Debbi didn't know what to say. She tried to put Chris's death in terms that Corey would understand: he had gone to heaven.

In a flash, Corey was gone. He dashed off. Debbi chased after her son to his bedroom, where he climbed on top of his bed and coiled into a ball. Head on his pillow, Corey cried.

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University of Texas at Austin, 1966. Columbine High School, 1999. Virginia Tech, 2007. Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2012. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, 2018. And so many others.

The Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security **tracks** K-12 school shootings – which it **defines** as “each and every instance a gun is brandished, is fired, or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims, time, day of the week (eg, planned attack, accidental, domestic violence, gang-related)” – in the United States going back to the 1970s. The numbers are staggering: 163 from 1970 to 1979, 218 from 1980 to 1989, 265 from 1990 to 1999, 353 from 2000 to 2009 and 245 from 2010 to 2017. The shooting at Stoneman Douglas came exactly six weeks into 2018. It was school shooting number 15 for the year.

These shootings have wreaked havoc. Shooters have taken lives, injured others and have left survivors and loved ones with scars – both physical and psychological.

The shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was a turning point for Chris and Debbi. Both were working at South Broward at the time: Chris in security, Debbi as a teacher. They weren't fearful for their lives, and they never thought of getting out of education. But Columbine made them realise a school shooting could happen to them. It also made them think about what it would mean if something happened to either of them. Tom was seven years old. Corey hadn't even turned four. Someone would need to take care of them. So, Chris and Debbi wrote a will.

“You don’t ever really think that it’s going to be you that it happens to, but you make all those thoughts and precautions in your head just in case,” Debbi explains.

Just under 19 years later, the unthinkable had happened.

The last two weeks in February, after Chris’s death, were a hazy blur for Debbi. She was numb and in shock. But she quickly found out there were things to be done. The day after the shooting, whether she wanted to be or not, Debbi was thrown into being busy. Eventually, she’d embrace this as her way of coping. There were meetings, including one with survivors of the Stoneman Douglas shooting and victims’ loved ones. There were legal and government matters to attend to. There were the media and phone calls to deal with. Then-governor, now-Senator Rick Scott and Senator Marco Rubio rang. There were visitors.

*There’s so many people.*

The thought repeated itself over and over in Debbi’s head the first two days after the shooting.

*Where did they all park?*

Saturday, three days after the shooting, Debbi learned how Chris was murdered. A Broward Sheriff’s Office detective came to the house and told her that he could tell her as little or as much as she wanted to know. The detective added that Debbi wouldn’t be able to unhear anything he would say.

Debbi wanted everything. The detective walked her through the timeline of events, starting with Cruz arriving at the school.

Within 30 seconds of Cruz’s first shot, Chris was running into the 1200 building. He quickly encountered the gunman in the hallway. Cruz shot Chris in the leg. After that, Chris fell to the ground and crawled to safety into an alcove-like area in the hallway. Later, the gunman encountered Chris again, shooting him twice in the chest from point-blank range. Chris died en route to the hospital.

Debbi says the detective told her that Chris was the only person running into the building when people were running away. That Chris was a hero.

Monday, five days after the shooting, Debbi got Corey back on a schedule. Corey needs structure. He doesn't function well without a routine so, that day, he returned to the adult day facility. He wanted to go back. There, Corey had friends, people who wouldn't pepper him with questions about his father and who wouldn't talk about the shooting and its aftermath. Corey doesn't do well when people talk about the shooting.

People were lined up around the outside of Landmark Funeral Home in Hollywood when Debbi arrived around 2:30PM on Tuesday to see Chris for the first time since before the shooting. For six hours the line snaked from room to room as people waited their turns to say goodbye and offer condolences. Debbi estimates a couple thousand people showed up. Big crowds showed up the next day at Chris's funeral and military burial to pay their respects, too.



Sometime around 7:30 that night – Wednesday, one week after the shooting – Debbi found herself at Stoneman Douglas. Three carloads of family accompanied her. It was a group decision to go. Debbi was okay with it. They were already nearby, having attended a dinner put on by the Navy reserve in Chris's honour. Besides, she didn't know when she'd next be back.



They were there to see a makeshift memorial in front of the school, put together to honour those killed in the shooting. The area was packed with people. Street lights cut through the pitch-black night as Debbi took in her surroundings. There were so many mementos that you couldn't almost see the crosses; 17 of them, one for each victim. There – right there: Chris's. It was swarmed by flowers, at least one Hawaiian lei, a teddy bear, letters, rocks with his name on them and a pair of someone's wrestling shoes.

“It's such a public event, and it's so hard to wrap your head around that,” Debbi says about the shooting. “There were just so many things, and that outpouring is overwhelming, and you're just, like – it feels like you're in a fog, like you're living in a movie, and it's not really you. You're, like, outside of your body, looking around at everything and just wondering, like, ‘What the hell is going on?’”

The trip to Stoneman Douglas also served another purpose. Debbi had only been there a couple times before the shooting. It was just so far away from home, you know? Because of this, she was unfamiliar with the school. Stoneman Douglas was locked up that night, but that didn't stop her from trying to form a better mental picture of the day of the shooting, what happened and how it was possible.

America's attention was still on Stoneman Douglas. CNN hosted a nationally televised town hall that night about it. Debbi had been invited, but declined because it was the day of her husband's funeral. She and about 20 others caught the tail end of it, though, at her house. Parked around the television, people soon started yelling: National Rifle Association spokesperson Dana Loesch was on. “She's just an idiot,” Debbi says of Loesch.

11 days after the shooting, and four since his burial, was Chris's birthday. He would have turned 50. There was going to be a surprise party. Debbi had it all planned out: a Sunday brunch buffet for about 20 people at Farmer's Pick Buffet at the Isle Casino in nearby Pompano. The room was booked. Invitations were sent.

But then the shooting happened. So, instead of brunch, Debbi quickly pulled together a celebration of life at Topeekeegee Yugnee Park in Hollywood. There were T-shirts, photos, music. The Hixons brought beer. Others brought food. Around 200 people showed up. Debbi tried to stay positive and get through it as best she could. She was glad to see so many people come out and share their stories about Chris. On the inside, though, Debbi was still devastated.

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Saturday, March 24, 2018, was the March For Our Lives rally. It was sunny, but chilly. Hundreds of people descended on Washington, DC, for what had become a nationally televised, noisy, standing room-only event.

In short order, a number of students who had survived the previous month's mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas had come together and organized the rally against gun violence. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the mastermind behind and original lead actor in the Broadway smash hit *Hamilton*, performed alongside Ben Platt, the original lead actor from the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen*.

Emmy-, Grammy- and Oscar-winning rapper Common also performed. As did Jennifer Hudson. And Miley Cyrus. And Ariana Grande. And Demi Lovato. But, despite the star power, it was students who took to the stage and made the biggest impact. They weren't only from Stoneman Douglas. Students from Chicago and Los Angeles told their stories of how gun violence had changed their lives. Martin Luther King Jr's nine-year-old granddaughter spoke about her own dream. "That enough is enough, and this should be a gun-free world," Yolanda Renee King said. "Period."

Up front in a VIP section – reserved for families of victims and those who were injured in the Stoneman Douglas shooting as well as for celebrities – over by the left side of the stage was Debbi. Friends and family accompanied her, providing support. A metal barrier a little bit higher than Debbi's waist stood in front of her. Nearby, a projector screen showed what was happening on the stage.

The New England Patriots football team donated their plane to fly Debbi and others impacted by the shooting up for the event. Debbi never thought of not going. She wanted to be there. It was an opportunity to get involved. Plus, there was a curiosity element for her: there had been so much talk and excitement leading up to it.

Still, being at the rally wasn't easy for Debbi. It was overwhelming. Tears flowed off and on. And she kept asking herself the same questions over and over in her head.

*How did we get here?*

*How is this possible?*

The United States may be a divided country, but one thing that many Americans seem to agree on is gun reform. Gallup, an international firm that polls people on a variety of topics, recently surveyed Americans on both topics after the Stoneman Douglas shooting. In March of 2018, Gallup **released** polling that found 67 per cent of people were in favour of stricter laws on gun sales, the highest that number had been in 25 years.

When it came to reform that would reduce mass shootings at schools, Gallup polling data also **released** in March of 2018 showed that six reform ideas had majority favourability, including increased training for officers responding to active shootings (95 per cent), background checks on every gun purchase (92 per cent) and prohibiting the sale of semiautomatic weapons like the AR-15 rifle that the gunman used at Stoneman Douglas (56 per cent).

Debbi is a Democrat. She always has been. Hillary Clinton got her vote in the 2016 presidential election. Before he was killed, Chris was also a lifelong Democrat. His vote in 2016, though, went to Donald Trump.

The couple's views, to some extent, also differed when it came to guns. Debbi didn't like guns at all. Chris had one; it was to protect their house. He believed in the Second Amendment. She wasn't opposed to it, and both agreed that assault-style guns shouldn't be available for civilians.

Debbi's views on guns haven't changed since the shooting, and when she hears about other shootings that have happened since Chris's murder, she gets mad. "Why is this such an American issue?" she asks. "What is it about us in America that keeps the – I mean, there are crazy people in other countries, right? But they don't have the mass shootings we have."

She's not done.

"As a personal reflection, there are just too many guns in America," Debbi says. "There are daily gun violence issues killing lots of Americans every day, so it isn't just about mass shootings. There's a lot of gun violence in our country, and we as a country need to find a way to make it stop. I'm not sure what the answer is, but it has to be a collective answer. It can't be

one side or the other. It has to be something that all of us agree we're going to make changes for."

A couple months or so after the shooting, she started thinking about what changes were needed for school safety reform. What should the national standards be, according to Debbi? Training. Clear, concise and consistent district-wide policies. Securing school perimeters. This last one is really important to Debbi. She feels if the perimeter of a school is secure, then everybody inside that school can focus on what they're there for: teaching.

Debbi is fine with having armed security on campus, as long as they aren't in classrooms. Chris would have been a perfect person to have a weapon on campus, she says. But when it comes to putting guns in teachers' hands, Debbi is definitive: it should never, ever happen. Period.

"You know, people say, 'Oh, they'll be highly trained,'" she begins. "Well, police officers are highly trained, and look what happens: sometimes they get carried away, sometimes they take something the wrong way, and they shoot people they shouldn't. Well, a teacher is not going to be as trained as that, and then you add on all those emotional other issues [of being a teacher] on top of it, and I just think you're asking for trouble."

Before the shooting, Debbi was an environmental advocate. She had been one for more than two decades. But gun reform? Over the years, she donated money and signed petitions for it, but really wasn't all that involved in the fight. Then Stoneman Douglas happened. Chris was killed. And she decided it was time to act.

"People give a crap [about] what I have to say right now," Debbi said, reflecting on why she had chosen to take an active role in gun reform advocacy. It was early January 2019 when she said this; she knew her time in the spotlight wasn't going to last forever. "Who was I eleven months ago? I haven't changed my views on anything, but [now] I have a voice, I have an opportunity."

"I only have a voice because it's Chris's voice," she adds. "He died trying to keep people safe. I feel like the best way for me to honour that and honour him [is] to continue trying to make people safe in situations we can control."

Despite everything she was going through personally in the wake of her husband's murder, Debbi joined two bipartisan advocacy groups within two months after her trip to Washington,

DC.

And in September, Debbi took part in a gun buyback event in Coral Springs, Florida – a city that neighbours Parkland – about 30 miles north of where she lives in Hollywood. In exchange for firearms, people got Publix grocery store gift cards. Debbi was hoping that 50 guns would get bought back that day. She says 129 were.

In December, she went to her state's capital, Tallahassee. There, she spoke on the first day of the final Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission hearings, before the commission submitted its final **458-page report** – complete with details of what happened and recommendations so a similar shooting won't take place again – to state officials. Debbi voiced her belief that teachers should never be armed. She talked about Chris and who he was.

As of early January 2019, about 11 months since the shooting, Debbi had taken part in ten or so events, and she isn't finished just yet. A second buyback event has been planned for the end of March in Hollywood. There could be a national buyback event someday. She's talked with two of Florida's congressional representatives, Ted Deutch and Debbie Wasserman Schultz, about it.

Advocacy nowadays can be dangerous, especially online. Social media is often a hotbed for opposition and harassment. However, if Debbi's been a target, it's failed. She doesn't really pay attention to anything thrown her way. Fighting with people on Twitter isn't her thing. If Debbi encounters someone online who disagrees with her and is polite, she's happy to chat about their respective views. If someone is rude to her, though, on Twitter or Facebook, Debbi nips the situation in the bud and deletes whatever she posted. She says she's only had to do it once.

“People that are that way, [it] doesn't matter what you say, they're not going to change their opinion,” Debbi says. “So, you just have to be able to judge what interaction is worth it.”

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Debbi wanted to go back to work at South Broward. In fact, the thought of not going back never crossed her mind. It was time for her to try and get back into a routine. Plus, the busiest time of the school year for her was quickly approaching: student registration. This would give her a chance to focus on something other than the shooting and Chris's death. She wanted this escape. She went back in early March.

That's not to say being back was easy.

A lot of staff and students were uncomfortable around her. For a couple weeks, people would walk by her office door and wave, but wouldn't stick around and talk. Debbi thinks it was because nobody knew what to say. The feeling was mutual. Sometimes, Debbi would just close her door. She still does, though not as often. Now, at South Broward, as long as the conversation is about work, Debbi is fine. But when someone asks her how she's doing, she breaks down.

"It's the first thing you want to ask someone, but how do you answer that?" Debbi starts to explain late on a Tuesday night this past December, ten months since the shooting. "How do I really answer that? If I tell you, 'good.' 'Good' in terms of what? And, 'Okay.' You know, I – it's a hard question to answer. And I – it just, it makes me cry when people ask me."

Feeling safe at South Broward isn't a problem for Debbi. She feels safe working there. After 27 years teaching science – all in the Broward County public school district – Debbi is in her third year as a magnet program administrator. She's tasked with recruiting students for the school's Maritime, Marine Science and Technology department; its budget, and overseeing the grades and schedules of more than 600 students in the department. Her office is in the back part of a building, giving her, she says, protection if something happened at the school.

If she were still a teacher, she says, things would be different. If she had to grade papers and stand in front of students after what happened at her husband's school, she never would have come back.

Debbi got a taste of what that would have been like – if she were a teacher after the shooting – the first week back from spring break. She'd only been back at work for a few weeks or so, and ended up proctoring a test. It was the first part of the school day. The bell rang. Students started coming down the hallway where Debbi was standing. Everything was fine. Everything was completely normal. But Debbi got overwhelmed. She slid to the floor and started crying. Someone else had to step in.

What does Tom, Chris and Debbi's oldest son, think about Debbi working in a school after the shooting? Debbi doesn't know. Tom hasn't voiced any concerns. But Debbi does know how Corey, the couple's youngest, feels.

It was May, or possibly June, when she found out. Corey was in the middle of a grief counseling session, and Debbi was sitting in. The therapist had a question for then-22-year-old with Kabuki syndrome and a heart condition: how did his father's death make him feel?

Scared.

The therapist and Debbi were puzzled. Why?

"I'm afraid my mommy's not going to come home, too."

Hearing that broke Debbi's heart. She had never considered that before. She also felt horrible: there wasn't a way to make Corey feel better.



Corey's fear eventually went away, or so Debbi thought. But this past Autumn, she and Corey had a meeting with the school district's superintendent and a member of the school board. Afterward, Debbi asked her son if he felt better and if Debbi was safe at work. The answer? "No."

This makes Debbi sad. She tells Corey that she's fine. But she knows she isn't being honest.

"I lie to him every day," Debbi explains. "I can't promise him that. It's wrong of me to do that, because I happen to be in a place, unfortunately, that it could happen."

Loud sounds at South Broward make Debbi nervous. Large crowds at school make her uncomfortable. And when she walks down a hallway there, she often asks herself questions about Chris and the shooting.

*Where was he standing?*

*How did it go down?*

"[It's] so hard to wrap your head around that this could have really happened. And you can't stand in a hallway and not picture it, because, I mean, I go on with my daily life, I do what I have to do, but there isn't a second of my day that I don't replay that in my head," Debbi says. "I play that scene over every day. Doesn't matter if I'm at work, if I'm in my car, if I'm at home, any time my mind is not busy doing something else, that's what my mind goes to."

Nighttime used to be Chris and Debbi's time together. When Chris worked at Stoneman Douglas and would get home late from a long day at work, he would eat a heated-up dinner and they would talk, watch television a bit. It was their time to be a couple.

The weeks after the shooting brought Debbi next to no sleep at all. Maybe an hour or so each night. There was always a visitor at the house as the hours grew late, always something Debbi needed to do.

As time passed, though, and visitors disappeared, Debbi's gotten more shuteye – once she is actually able to fall asleep, which remains difficult. But before she eventually does, each night, she makes sure to do one thing: listen to Chris. She still has a couple voicemails from him saved on her cell phone.



“He always ended his voicemail with ‘I love you.’ So, he’s told me he’s loved me every night since he’s gone,” Debbi says. Hearing Chris tell her he loves her is hard. It makes Debbi want to believe her husband is still alive and that maybe he’ll come home. “I don’t know if it’s healthy that I do that or not, but I’m not ready to stop doing it yet.”

Voicemails aren’t the only things Debbi’s kept. In fact, for the most part, she hasn’t done anything with Chris’s belongings. They’re right where they were in their house prior to the shooting.

The two shared a closet. Debbi’s clothes are still on one side, Chris’s on the other. Most of his are Stoneman Douglas polo shirts – a mix of grey, burgundy and black – that he wore to work. The clothes still smell like him, Debbi says a few days after Christmas, more than ten months after the shooting. She’s in the closet every day, but on some days she stands in there a few extra minutes and takes everything in: the smells, the memories.

On the surface, life at the Hixon household hasn’t changed much since before Chris was murdered. The family has always had a routine. Debbi is still busy. She goes to work. She exercises. She takes care of Corey.

But there are differences. Before the shooting, Debbi made smoothies in the mornings before work for her and Chris. Since then, she can’t get herself to make one. Breakfast is Raisin Bran now. Family dinners at the table are a thing of the past, too. Corey eats in his room while watching a Catholic Church channel on television.

Then there are chores. Debbi has had to take on Chris’s around the house. She’s had to start mowing the lawn and learn how to edge it. Debbi’s not the only person in the world that does household chores by themselves – she knows this – but sometimes she gets mad about doing them. This isn’t the life she wanted.

Journalists have come, off and on, looking for comments. She started reaching out to them herself too, toward the end of last school year, and has continued to do so. She feels an impulse to correct the media. She does that when she sees it reported that students were the only ones killed last Valentine’s Day at her husband’s school.

“It boils my blood,” Debbi says. “It is my button that gets pushed whenever I see that, and I tend to do a lot of phone calling, a lot of Twitter – that’s the only reason I even got on Twitter, to be honest, because I never had Twitter before this – or Facebook messages. It seems like I

am constantly reminding the press that it was not 17 students, and I don't understand why it is such a difficult fact to report properly.”

It doesn't matter if it's local or the national media. If Debbi sees the inaccuracy, she pounces. She does it so often now that she feels like it's almost a daily occurrence. Who could blame her? Her husband was murdered in a horrific tragedy. If you were in her shoes, you wouldn't want your loved one neglected from the story – as if they were never there – by the media.

Events honouring the shooting's victims, including Chris, have worked their way into her calendar. On one hand, Debbi is grateful that people are keeping her husband's memory alive. Hopefully, she adds, Chris knew how much people loved and admired him. On the other hand, each event is a harsh reminder that he really is dead. Going back to Stoneman Douglas is still hard. Debbi's gone back to a handful of times since the shooting. Tears mark each visit.

The biggest change, the thing Debbi misses the most now that Chris is gone, though, is that she no longer has someone who always has her back. It's lonely. She thinks about it every day. You can hear her voice tremble as she talks about it.

“Corey's very medically and developmentally challenging, and there's a lot of decisions that you make. A lot. Like what school? What doctor? Should you try this medicine? Should you let him do this? And, you know, it was something we did together,” Debbi says.

Figuring out what was best for Corey over the years was only part of what they did as a team. There was never a decision they didn't make together, for 30 years. “So, you know, you're walking a tightrope, trying to figure out if you're doing the right thing,” she explains.

Some days, it's nearly impossible for Debbi to walk that tightrope by herself. Yes, she has a support system of friends and family to draw on now. And, yes, she's grateful for everyone's help, like when she needed help purchasing hurricane windows three months after the shooting. But sometimes Debbi feels like she's imposing on others, or being a burden on Tom, her and Chris's eldest.

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One thing about the Hixon household is that the television is always on. And on a Friday night nearing the middle of January, it provided white noise in the background as Debbi talked.

Debbi was sprawled out at an angle on the long, brown couch in the living room. The family's cat, a mutt resembling a long-haired Maine Coon, was squished between her leg and the back of the couch. It was getting late – well after 8PM. She was already in her pajamas: a Stoneman Douglas football shirt, flannel pants and garnet-and-gold fuzzy Florida State University socks. Corey had already gotten ready for bed. He would soon be fast asleep.

It had been a big day. The state's newly elected governor, Ron DeSantis, had suspended Broward Sheriff Scott Israel for his handling of the Stoneman Douglas shooting. Debbi got the news privately the night before, and decided at the last second to speak at DeSantis's press conference announcing the suspension. She wasn't alone: several people who lost loved ones in the massacre spoke. Debbi thanked her new governor for the decision. She also talked briefly about her husband, how Chris ran into the building where the shooting was happening, and how she looked forward to having a sheriff that trained their personnel to do exactly that.

"I always feel like the adults get left out of the story, and I wanted to be sure that the people standing there did not forget that there were adults that immediately went in or did something to try to mitigate what was going on," Debbi said. "That gets overlooked a lot, and sometimes it hits me that now is an opportunity to share that fact with the press because they seem to get sucked into a lot of other things."

She had also just recently finished reading the final report put out by the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission. Overall, she felt the 458-page document was a good account of what happened, what went right and what went wrong. She agreed with a lot of the report's recommendations. A few she didn't support at all: arming teachers was one of them.

Within days of the shooting, Debbi had grown angry – really angry. A variety of things fed that anger, but the primary cause was the fact that the attack at Stoneman Douglas had been so preventable, both prior to and on that day. For months, close friends and family told her that she should see a specialist. Tom, Chris and Debbi's oldest son, was able to finally convince her last month. Finally in January, she had her first appointment.

Debbi didn't have any expectations going into it. Earlier, she didn't know if seeing someone would change how she felt. So, how did it go? Fine. She was going to go back on Monday. The plan was to go once a week for a month. After that, she and the specialist would reevaluate

things. Maybe there would be more therapy. Maybe it'd be determined that Debbi didn't need to go. Maybe just a wellness plan instead.

She doesn't think she'll ever stop being angry. Anger was something she had come to learn to live with. From her couch, that Friday night, she said she didn't know whether or not it would be possible ever to have closure.

"What does closure look like?" she asked. "There's no closure. [Chris]'s not here. Even if and when, and I hope it's what happens, Nikolas Cruz" – the confessed gunman – "gets the death penalty and is no longer here, that's still not ever going to bring Chris back. So, I don't – I don't know where closure would come from."

Every day, Debbi thinks about what happened. It's not like she wants to. She can't help it. In some ways, it felt like it had been forever since the shooting occurred. A lot had happened in the past 11 months. So many events related to Chris's murder. So many tears shed. So many lonely nights. Chances for new memories had come and gone. On the other hand, it felt like the shooting had taken place only yesterday. She had relived it over and over. It was like a wound that just kept reopening.

February 14, the shooting's one-year anniversary, was just a little over a month away. Debbi didn't know yet what she'd do on that day. Chris's family was going to be in town, but she didn't want to commit to anything; she didn't know how she'd feel. One thing she did know was that she didn't want people to remember her husband for the way he died. Debbi wanted Chris to be remembered for the way he lived.

Chris wasn't only a hero on the day he was murdered, Debbi said. He was like that his whole life.

11 days after the anniversary would be his birthday. He would have been turning 51.

At the cemetery on the day of Chris's military burial, Debbi's life had already changed so much. Nearly 11 months later, in the same living room that had turned into a beehive of activity in the hours after the shooting, Debbi was still trying to deal with everything.



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“You think it’s going to get easier,” she said, “but it’s exhausting. It’s overwhelming. Infuriating.”

*Devon Heinen is journalist living in Seattle, Washington. His work has appeared in The Atlantic, VICE, Sports Illustrated, ESPN and others. He tweets @DevonHeinen.*

*Images courtesy of Debbi Hixon.*



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