

Columbia shooting victims remembered, families supported



Hundreds gather for an interdenominational candle-lit vigil Jan. 30 outside The Mall in Columbia, where mall employees Brianna Benlolo and Tyler Johnson were killed Jan. 25. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

CATONSVILLE - Nicole Madden, 18, calls herself “a background leader” and isn’t typically one to seek attention or launch a fundraiser, she said. The Jan. 25 shooting at the Mall in Columbia, however, compelled her to action.

The incident that claimed the lives of co-workers Brianna Benlolo, 21, and Tyler Johnson, 25, as well as the alleged shooter, 17-year-old Darion Aguilar, struck too close to home for her. The Mount de Sales Academy senior has lived in Columbia her whole life, she said. She felt she had to do something.

For three days of the week following the shooting, Madden sold black ribbons as bracelets to classmates and staff of the Catonsville school. She asked for 50 cents, but many donated more. She raised \$265 for a foundation benefitting Benlolo’s 2-year-old son.

“I just wanted to do something to help,” she said.

A parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville, Madden said Zumiez, the skate shop where the shooting took place, is her favorite store in the mall - a mall she’s visited “a million times,” she said. She even applied for a job at Zumiez in October. She didn’t get it, but her application put her in touch with Benlolo. Madden would visit with her when she was at the store, she said, and remembers her as fun and easy to talk to.

For many in Columbia, the tragedy is still raw. Wayman Scott, youth minister at St. John the Evangelist in Columbia, couched in a long, written reflection on light overcoming darkness news to his youth that Johnson was the same man who spoke to them in November 2012. Johnson was a recovering drug addict who shared his story to dissuade teens from drug use. He also worked with other addicts.

Johnson spoke to St. John’s youth group as part of a Teen 2 Teen event aimed at preventing drug use.

"It was a dark thing that happened a week ago, but I think that the ministry and witness that Tyler shared in life outweighs the way he died," Scott wrote.

His letter provided a list of resources where Columbia youths could seek counseling. In a message in the parish's Feb. 2 bulletin, St. John's pastor Father Gerard J. Bowen told parishioners that the feelings of loss, fear and grief would take time to "settle down and be sorted out." He encouraged parishioners to care for themselves and loved ones through counseling, prayer and by expressing their feelings.

The mall was somewhere people felt safe, and the shooting jarred that sense of security, he said. He bemoaned that violence of its type occurs "with an incomprehensible frequency."

"If there is a mystery as to why the blameless, especially children, suffer, there is also a mystery as to what so unhinges someone, especially our young, with their whole lives ahead of them, that they are drawn to take others' lives, and then to take their own," he wrote.

The tragedy "gives us a sudden unwelcomed awareness and clarity of the sufferings that other parents, children, friends, family and communities have endured," he wrote. "The root meaning of the word compassion means 'to suffer with.' So now, we too know."

Madden took photos of everyone who bought a ribbon and made a collage to remember her efforts to do something larger than herself, she said. She's stopped wearing the ribbon daily, but said she keeps it on a lamp beside her bed.

The Zumiez store is currently closed, and a white wall partitions it from view. During a recent trip to the mall, Madden joined others who had left written messages on the wall. She thanked Johnson and Benlolo for their help, she said.

She wants the families to know that people care.

"Even though money can't provide comfort for what happened, and even though I didn't know Brianna and Tyler as they did ... having met them only a couple times, I was struck by their personalities. When I heard about the tragedy, I wanted to do something about it," she said. "It upset me."

Also see:

Candle-lit vigil pays tribute to victims of Columbia Mall shooting

A special Mass, counseling offered at Columbia parish after shooting