

# Fullerton parishioners, students respond after officer's murder

PERRY HALL – Dakota Kurek was outside of his home around 2 p.m. May 21 when he heard a woman scream at a man in a black Jeep to stop and get out of the car.

He then witnessed the woman, Baltimore County Police Officer Amy Caprio, being run over by the Jeep. Dakota, 21, sought help from his father, Tony, and older brother, Logan, 23, a volunteer firefighter with the Kingsville Volunteer Fire Company, who attempted to perform CPR on the fallen officer.

Caprio later died from her injuries, the first woman in the Baltimore County Police Department to fall in the line of duty.

"We tried to help her and do what we could," Tony said. "It was a horrible thing to be around. ... That quickly, someone's life was gone."

The Kureks are parishioners of St. Joseph in Fullerton, a little more than two miles to the south, where its school dealt with the impact of the fallen officer.

## **Lockdown**

Classes were wrapping up at St. Joseph School in Fullerton around 2:30 p.m., when Christina Ashby, assistant principal, was notified that a large number of patrol cars had just driven past the school.

The suspect in Caprio's murder and three accomplices were at large. (The four teen boys were indicted May 30 on charges of first-degree murder, burglary and conspiracy to commit burglary.)

Ashby called the local police, who told her to lockdown the school immediately. No one could exit the building; no one could enter.

The announcement was made over the PA system. While students and teachers were literally locked in their classrooms, Kenneth Pipkin, principal, and Ashby went into action.

“We’ve got all of our emergency procedures in place and all of that, but to see it all actually happen – I was so proud of our teachers, I was so proud of our students, I was so proud of our parents,” Ashby said.

That began with Ashby following a procedure discussed during St. Joseph’s State of the School address in April, when security was a heightened concern due to a number of fatal school shootings. The “one voice” policy ensures that one person speaks for the school on different fronts to avoid confusion.

Ashby was that contact for the police, who she was told to call every 45 minutes.

Pipkin and other administrators maintained open communication with parents; Father Jesse Bolger, their pastor; and the Office of Risk Management and Department of Schools for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

“We really don’t have any ‘I’s here. It’s all about team effort,” Pipkin said. “It was just one consistent message that everybody’s safe, everybody’s OK, just wait it out and we’ll be able to go home safely together.”

Pipkin and Ashby had prior experiences with lockdowns at previous jobs, but for at least the last 13 years, no current staff member could recall one at St. Joseph that was not a drill.

“We knew right when it started ... we weren’t getting out in a half-hour,” Pipkin said.

The lockdown stretched to four hours.

Fifth-grade teacher Kathi Trimble pulled out rosaries in her religion class.

“I said, ‘We can’t help what’s going on up the road. We can’t be there to help those people. This is the best thing we can do right now,’” she recalled. “We prayed the entire rosary, which took some time and kind of calmed them a little bit.”

Teachers did not tell students the nature of the crisis.

“You could’ve heard a pin drop in that classroom. They knew it wasn’t a drill,” Trimble said, adding that she had her own fears. “Making them feel safe was the

biggest thing.”

Jolene Sosnowski occupied her kindergartners with a movie of their choice (they selected “Tinkerbell”) while they ate snacks.

“At first we knew nothing,” said Sosnowski, whose daughter teaches at Gunpowder Elementary School, one of four public schools also on lockdown. “I could tell by the assistant principal’s voice that it was something serious, it wasn’t just another drill.”

“I told them (her kindergartners) there was something unsafe going on up the street, and that not all their moms and dads could get there.”

Near 7 p.m., police informed administrators that they could soon begin dismissal, but that it needed to be cautious.

Ashby said students were dismissed “graduation style” – one-by-one to a parent. Classes were dismissed from youngest to oldest; it was after 8 p.m. when the last student was paired with a parent.

## **Day after**

School opened the next morning with a two-hour delay.

Gail Vernick, St. Joseph’s school counselor, greeted students, purposefully observing their emotions. Vernick works half-days on Mondays, and had left at 2 p.m. May 21, before the lockdown began. She was unable to re-enter the school.

“I think because it was handled so well, there were very few kids that needed more (support) than what their teachers had provided,” Vernick said. “It was all handled so beautifully and in such a caring and thoughtful way.”

She made rounds to the classrooms to offer support.

“You want to let them know that we can talk about it, but you also don’t want to bombard and make them any more anxious than they need to be,” Vernick said.

During the lockdown, there was little outsiders could do to help. The day after, The Catholic High School of Baltimore provided faculty and staff with coffee and donuts.

Parents delivered a steady stream of breakfasts, lunches and gift cards.

The kindnesses were appreciated, but all on staff felt as if they were just doing their jobs.

“This is what we’re supposed to do,” Pipkin said. “It’s about keeping our kids safe, it’s about keeping our family safe. This is our home, and making sure our home is safe for our kids to be in.”

### **‘Back the Blue’**

Joshua Joseph, 13, and Corinne Quaerna, 14, St. Joseph students since kindergarten, used the lockdown as a final opportunity to bond with their fellow eighth-graders.

Quaerna is a founding member of the school’s “We’ve Got You Covered” club, which makes blankets and homemade cards for local people in need of support. Her family donated blue fabric for the club to make a blanket to send to the Caprio family.

The school will host a “Back the Blue” dress-down day June 1, when students are allowed to wear a blue shirt. It costs each student a \$1 donation, which will go to the Police Assistance Relief Fund. Caprio’s obituary asked that donations in her memory be made to that fund.

“It shows that we support them,” said Quaerna, who will attend Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville in the fall.

“We want them to feel that it’s OK,” added Joseph, who is headed to Loyola Blakefield in Towson.

They graduate June 1. Both plan to wear blue shirts to graduation practice earlier that day.

Vernick, the school counselor, said that a trauma causes the sense of a loss of control for some. Putting emotions into action, she said, is part of the process of healing.

“It’s very therapeutic for everyone involved,” Vernick said. “It’s one of the best ways to overcome the feelings – all the worry and anxiety – is to put it into action, to do

something.”

## **Changed neighborhood**

The May 21 tragedy hit close to home for Paula Beres, St. Joseph’s school librarian. Her house backs up to the home of the Kureks’, who offered the first response to Caprio. Her daughter, Allison, is friends with Logan Kurek, who performed CPR on the officer.

“It was just so unnerving because it’s a quiet, peaceful (neighborhood),” Beres said. “People say, ‘Were you nervous?’ And I go, ‘No, I felt sad.’ That has been my feeling for this officer, and for my neighbors who will never forget this. It’s just a feeling of sadness more than anything.”

Tony Kurek and his wife, Stefanie, have lived in Perry Hall since 1990. Their children all attended Catholic schools.

Dakota and Logan attended St. Michael the Archangel School in Overlea and then Calvert Hall College High School in Towson, where Logan was a graduate of the class of 2013. Their sister, Sierra, 18, attended St. Michael the Archangel and St. Joseph School, and is in the class of 2018 at Mercy High School in Baltimore.

Tony said the event has rattled their otherwise quiet neighborhood.

“Every day that I walk out my door ... I still see her laying there,” Tony said, adding that Caprio was struck near where he parks his truck.

Normalcy has started to return to the cul-de-sac, especially after a neighborhood Memorial Day cookout, which included Caprio’s mother, father and husband. Tony said that hearing from Caprio’s family, and knowing that they feel comfortable that she did not die alone, has helped his sons cope with what they witnessed.

Three days after he had performed CPR on Caprio outside of his home, Logan was notified that he had been accepted into the Baltimore County Fire-Rescue Academy.

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