

# Virginia Tech shooting victim left behind message of forgiveness

ARLINGTON, Va. – Mary Karen Read, a 19-year-old victim of the shootings at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, aspired to be a teacher. Now she is posthumously teaching a lesson of forgiveness in the aftermath of the deadliest shooting rampage in U.S. history.

“When a deep injury is done us, we never recover until we forgive,” Mary had written in a small red notebook discovered by her family in her dorm room at Virginia Tech the day after she was killed during her French class in Norris Hall April 16.

While forgiveness is probably not one of the first words that come to mind in the wake of the events that ended her life and the lives of 32 others, including the killer, it was what the college freshman believed.

Finding her handwritten quotes on forgiveness was not just a coincidence, but something meaningful and providential, according to Peter and Cathy Read, Mary’s father and stepmother, who belong to St. Mary of Sorrows Parish in Fairfax.

In fact, the quotes have brought healing to the family and many others present at Mary’s funeral, where her father read them publicly. As wounds were still fresh and feelings of anger inevitably rising, Peter Read knew he had to share his daughter’s message with others.

The notebook was first discovered while Cathy Read collected Mary’s belongings from her dorm room the day after her murder. Filled with anguish and sorrow, she opened the first page of a small red notebook and found the names of Mary’s friends and their birthdays. She placed it alongside photo albums, picture frames and some other things in one of the milk crates she gave Mary before she went off to college.

It was not until the morning of Mary’s funeral one week later on April 24 that the contents of the notebook were discovered with the help of one of Mary’s five younger siblings, her brother Brendan. Waving the notebook in the air, the 2-year-

old announced his new possession, then dropped it on the floor and ran off.

Seeing the notebook for the first time, Peter Read reached down to pick it up and began reading. He discovered that for three years Mary had been collecting quotes on various subjects including boys, love and friendships.

The last 10 quotes she wrote, however, caught her father's attention. In February of this year, she wrote about the profound importance of forgiveness.

Among some of her last entries were:

- "Forgiveness means letting go of the past."
- "Forgiving is not forgetting. It's letting go of the hurt."
- "To forgive is the highest, most beautiful form of love. In return, you will receive untold peace and happiness."
- "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future."

"I just read them a couple of times and I realized this was something we needed to share," said Peter Read, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel. Although the family had initially decided not to have a eulogy, he felt compelled to share his daughter's message at the funeral.

"I knew it touched people by their reaction, but I didn't know how deeply and widely ... they needed to hear that message from Mary," he said.

Days following the funeral several people told the Reads they had reconciled broken relationships after hearing Mary's messages of forgiveness.

"This never should have happened," said Cathy Read, a Navy commander, about the shootings. "But God did things to cushion the blow and that helps us carry on," she added, wiping away tears.

The message of forgiveness was no surprise to Mary's family, who remembered her as a vibrant and faith-filled teen.

Peter Read told the Arlington Catholic Herald, diocesan newspaper, that he frequently reads Mary's notebook even though he has it practically memorized,

saying it helps him to “remember what matters.”

He said it would be easy to “continue to wallow in despair and be angry and let that turn to hate, which is so far from what we need.”

“A lot of people are responding out of fear,” he added, saying they want to “seek vengeance and seek some kind of justice which isn’t tempered by mercy.”