

‘I don’t have any choice’: How father of Sandy Hook victim is working to save lives

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Editor’s note: *The 2018 AAP National Conference & Exhibition will take place from Nov. 2-6 in Orlando.*

As a full-time musician, Mark Barden had the luxury of being at home with his kids during the day. When his older two went off to school, he and his son, Daniel, had some extra alone time together.

“He was such a caring kid and he was so compassionate, so concerned about others — from other adults to other kids to the ants in our kitchen to the worms on our sidewalk,” Barden said. “We used to joke that he was the caretaker of all living things.”

Daniel was one of 20 first-graders and six educators who were gunned down on Dec. 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

“I still can’t even believe I’m hearing myself when I say my Daniel, the third of my three children, was murdered and he’s gone forever,” Barden said. “It’s still kind of surreal to me.”

Shortly after the shooting, Barden, other families who lost loved ones and community members started Sandy Hook Promise to address gun violence. Barden will tell his story and describe how the organization is working to prevent gun-related deaths during a plenary address titled “Sandy Hook Promise: Know the Signs (P4041)” from 10:30-10:50 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 6.

In the early days, Sandy Hook Promise focused on legislation to expand background checks for gun purchases. Barden met with legislators and President Barack Obama, and was interviewed by national media outlets.

Ultimately, the measure failed to get enough votes. So, Sandy Hook Promise went back to the drawing board.

“Even though a lot of folks use the term ‘gun violence prevention,’ we realized the prevention part really wasn’t being addressed in the way that we felt it could be, so that’s where we began to focus our mission,” said Barden, the group’s managing director.

Sandy Hook Promise now offers mental health and wellness programs at no cost to schools and organizations to train youths and adults to recognize the signs that an individual is at risk of self-harm or harming others and how to intervene.

“I do know from mounting anecdotal evidence in the field, we have prevented a growing number of mass shootings, we have intervened and prevented numerous suicides, and those numbers are continuing to grow...” Barden said.

Despite the impact Sandy Hook Promise has had, Barden acknowledges that he still struggles with his grief, and news of other school shootings are devastating.

Yet, he feels a sense of responsibility to do something to try to make up for Daniel's inability to continue caring for others.

"The grief is always going to be there. There's nothing I can do to change that," Barden said. "What's in my control is the ability to do something about it or to not do something about it. When I look at it that way, I feel like I don't have any choice. ... I know I have the potential to have a positive impact and to save lives. How can I say, 'Nah, it's too hard'?"

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