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After school shootings, reclaiming scarred space is part of the healing

When Marysville students return to school next week, the cafeteria where a gunman shot five students before taking his own life will be closed. Experts say a school shooting scene needs more than a fresh coat of paint for a community to heal from the trauma.

By Jennifer Sullivan and Leah Todd

Seattle Times staff reporters



Kaylyn Springer knew it wouldn't be easy.

The sophomore's first class this fall at Seattle Pacific University was in Otto Miller Hall, where three months earlier a troubled man fatally shot one student and wounded two others. The building — a classroom facility tucked away from main thoroughfares on the private college campus — had been closed since the June 5 shootings.

"We had expected ... we would walk back in and all the feelings would come back," said Springer, 19.

That didn't happen.

Walking into the building ahead of her Christian Scripture class in September, Springer saw a fresh coat of slate-gray paint on the walls. She stepped on new multicolored carpet and around modern furniture that left the foyer bearing little resemblance to the place where tragedy struck.

"That's the first thing we noticed when we walked in is, 'Oh, it looks a little different here,'" Springer recalled. "Instead of, 'Well, this is the place where something happened.'"

For many schools marred by tragedy like Seattle Pacific University (SPU), fresh paint, new carpeting or wholesale reconstruction has been as much a part of the recovery as grief counseling and community support.

Those decisions are just beginning to be considered at Marysville-Pilchuck High School, where last Friday a 15-year-old freshman shot five other students in the cafeteria, killing two, before taking his own life.

The school is expected to reopen Monday, but the cafeteria — one of two on campus — will remain closed. According to the district, what will be done with the building is still being decided, but it appears some change is likely, even necessary.

"The district will be working with students, parents, faculty and staff on how we move forward," Aaron Toso, spokesman for the Marysville School District, said in an email Tuesday. "There could be a radical remodel or something different, we just do not know at this time."

At Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colo., the library where most of the dozen students were massacred on April 20, 1999, was transformed into an atrium bearing little resemblance to the former space.

At Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Ore., where a 14-year-old student was gunned down in the gymnasium in June, students returned this fall to find a remodeled building where a large series of TV screens and white shelves highlighted their athletic achievements.

"Transforming means a renewal, not necessarily doing away with," SPU President Daniel Martin said on Tuesday. "To transform that space so we could renew it for a different purpose. To come in and feel that different space with a different design, different colors, certainly would send a message that this is new space and we're moving into it."

Remodel, treatment

Dr. Steven Berkowitz, associate professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania and director of Penn Center for Youth and Family Trauma Response and Recovery, said remodeling and changing the appearance of a building where an emotionally devastating incident like a shooting took place can be beneficial — but only if done in tandem with treatment.

"We know that traumatic reminders, such as the cafeteria, are significant factors in predicting and developing poor outcomes for kids after events like this," said Berkowitz, a national expert in the psychological trauma inflicted by school shootings.

But, he says, simply covering a school-shooting scene with new paint, carpet and other elements of remodeling might calm some uneasiness, but it "probably doesn't work as well as we'd like it to."

"To make believe that tearing down a building and it's going away isn't realistic," Berkowitz said. "You can do all of those things, but it has to be integrated into their lives. ... More important is to work with children and families in a form of treatment to help them understand what the cues are, what the reminders are."

Berkowitz said the national standard in response to school shootings is for students to attend a type of group therapy in a classroom, perhaps their homeroom, and therapy with their families.

"If it's done well, families are invited into these group [class] sessions and it is made into multifamily sessions. These kind of events are family traumas," he said.

Martin, the SPU president, agrees. He said counseling, a spiritual foundation and the support from friends and colleagues were vital in the healing process for students and staff.

"For me, when we had the incident here on campus on June 5, receiving literally hundreds of emails, calls and texts in that first 24 to 48 hours was a real source of encouragement," Martin said. "It let us know that we're not alone. There were people ready to assist."

With that in mind, Martin, faculty and students at SPU have reached out to Marysville-Pilchuck graduates attending the university and to the teaching staff at the high school who attended SPU to "offer a listening ear," Martin said.

Students have made a photo card for the Snohomish County school, similar to the card that students at Seattle University sent to them after the shootings on the SPU campus.

"You know and sense the impact on those families specifically," Martin said. "Knowing what we experienced and the pain it caused is something that certainly you can empathize with. We wanted certainly to communicate that we were praying for them and we were here and can respond any way we can."

For some communities, the impact of a mass shooting cannot be dulled, muted or wiped away by new drywall, paint or mortar, regardless of the outpouring of support.

That was the case at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., where in December 2012, Adam Lanza, 20, fatally shot 20 children and six staff members before taking his own life. The community ultimately decided to demolish Sandy Hook and build a new school in its place.

SPU shooting

On June 5, Aaron Ybarra, of Mountlake Terrace, walked into Otto Miller Hall on the campus of the private, evangelical Christian university and opened fire, killing SPU student Paul Lee and wounding two others. He was stopped after a student-safety monitor rushed from his office and doused Ybarra in pepper spray.

Ybarra, who never attended SPU, wrote in a journal recovered by Seattle police that he admired the mass shootings at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech and considered the suicidal killers his role models. He has been charged with one count of premeditated first-degree murder, two counts of attempted first-degree murder and one count of second-degree assault, and is awaiting trial.

The shootings happened on the second-to-last day of school, leaving SPU with the summer to redesign the entryway at Otto Miller Hall.

Officials say it was done, in part, to update a decades-old décor. But mostly, the renovations were meant to give the space a new look and feel, so the building would not be defined by the shootings, said Craig Kispert, the college's vice president for business and finance.

A floor-to-ceiling sketch of the original building, when it was a turnaround for trolley cars in the early 1900s, covers the largest wall in the foyer. Wood-paneled dividers topped with green plants partition study areas, where students wearing headphones typed on laptops Tuesday afternoon.

The 1990s-era furniture has been replaced by modern chairs and light wooden tables with built-in power outlets. Part of a paved walkway outside the building has been planted with new grass.

SPU faculty held a rededication service before school started in September, when the building was blessed.

Kispert said SPU has properly honored the victims of the tragedy and the impact, but is trying not to let it define the campus.

New beginnings

Springer, the sophomore, said the renovation helped her and her classmates find a new beginning after the shootings. But more important than the new paint, she said, was the time and space the college gave students — through worship services and other gatherings — to heal together.

“Something happened, and we all grew from it,” Springer said.

Kendra Thiessen, a 22-year-old senior, said she, too, was anxious about walking into Otto Miller Hall again. She recalled the day of the shootings as the most frightening in her life. But the community support in their aftermath led to feeling the most loved and connected to her community she has ever felt, she said.

When Thiessen finally walked into the building this fall, she spent 45 minutes sitting quietly near the foyer windows, a few feet from where the shooter stood in June.

“It doesn't feel like the same space,” Thiessen said while she studied in the building's lobby Tuesday afternoon. “I like what they did to it. It's a good different. It reminds me how we're going to get through this.”

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