THIS IS JUST A DRILL.

In schools across Wisconsin, active-shooter drills have become as routine as standardized tests.

IS THIS JUST A DRILL?

But how they're best conducted – and how they affect the students they're meant to protect – remains very much up for debate.

BY JEFF OLOIZIA

ON A DREARY FALL AFTERNOON IN 2019, SUN PRAIRIE HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORE BROOKE BANDLI FOUND HERSELF NOT AT SCHOOL, AS SHE SHOULD'VE BEEN, BUT IN AN UNFAMILIAR HOME SURROUNDED BY SCHOOLMATES.

They covered every surface, chatting nervously. How many were there? A couple dozen? More? It was late September. They should have been worrying about the fall musical and asking each other to the homecoming dance. Instead, a different kind of question troubled Brooke: Where was her teacher? How had she even gotten here?

Just minutes earlier, she'd been in the school's performing arts center, practicing choreography for a fall production of "Footloose," when a call came over the loudspeaker announcing an active threat on school grounds. *Evacuate immediately.* Was this just a drill? She hardly had time to think before she was swept up in a stream of students running for the exit.

Within minutes, police officers carrying AR-15s flooded the scene. The announcement had triggered the school's ALICE protocol—short for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate—which encourages students to make their own decisions and teaches them, among other things, that it is better to break a window from the top corner as opposed to the center. For Brooke and her classmates, there was no thought but to flee.

They ran through the school's parking lot past the Sun Prairie Ice Arena. Instinctively, they kept running until they reached the neighborhood across the street. All at once, garage doors began to open. It was a Friday afternoon. The homeowners began to wave them inside. Brooke didn't stop until she reached a loft area on a home's second floor.

Later, the whole thing would be revealed to be a false alarm—the fabrication of a 15-year-old who'd called 911 claiming to have overheard two girls in a bathroom with a handgun talking about "shooting up the school." But Brooke and her classmates didn't know that yet.

In the relative safety of the loft, Brooke finally broke down. She didn't know who owned the house. Kids made frantic calls home, some borrowing each other's phones. Between sobs, she managed to call her dad and choke out a message: "I'm safe, but I'm not OK."

:::

THE NEXT DAY, Brooke was supposed to return to school for rehearsal, but her parents let her stay home. When she did return on Monday, she felt anxious and unsafe. For as long as she could remember—for as long as she'd been in school—Brooke had trained for this. Yet in the heat of the moment, that training hadn't prevented things from devolving into chaos. Her fellow students and even a few staff members told her she was overreacting, that the threat hadn't been real. She grew angry.

Eventually, at the urging of her homeroom teacher, she met with the school's associate principal, Chad Whalley. After listening to his student vent about how the school was failing to protect them, Whalley explained that he had recently begun working with a small group of students to improve school safety and asked if she might like to join. Brooke agreed.

For a time, her position as a school safety ambassador made Brooke feel empowered. By the time she was a senior, she'd helped plan the school's safety drills and had even attended the Wisconsin Safety Council's annual conference. She still couldn't use the door she had run out of two years before, but she felt like she had moved on.

Yet when the first drill of her senior year came, she had what she calls a "full panic response."

This time, the drill hewed more closely to a standard lockdown. Based on ALICE protocols and the location of Brooke's science classroom, the class decided to push heavy lab tables against the classroom door. Once it was barricaded, they turned off the lights and huddled in a supply closet. A police officer administering the drill jiggled the door handle and was unable to enter. Some of Brooke's classmates in the closet cut the tension by goofing around. After the drill ended and the class was released, Brooke went to the office and asked to go home.

STILL HAUNTED: Now in college, Brooke Bandli *(pictured above at UW–Eau Claire)* is still deeply affected by her experiences with school shooting drills as a student at Sun Prairie High School, especially one that was triggered by a false report.

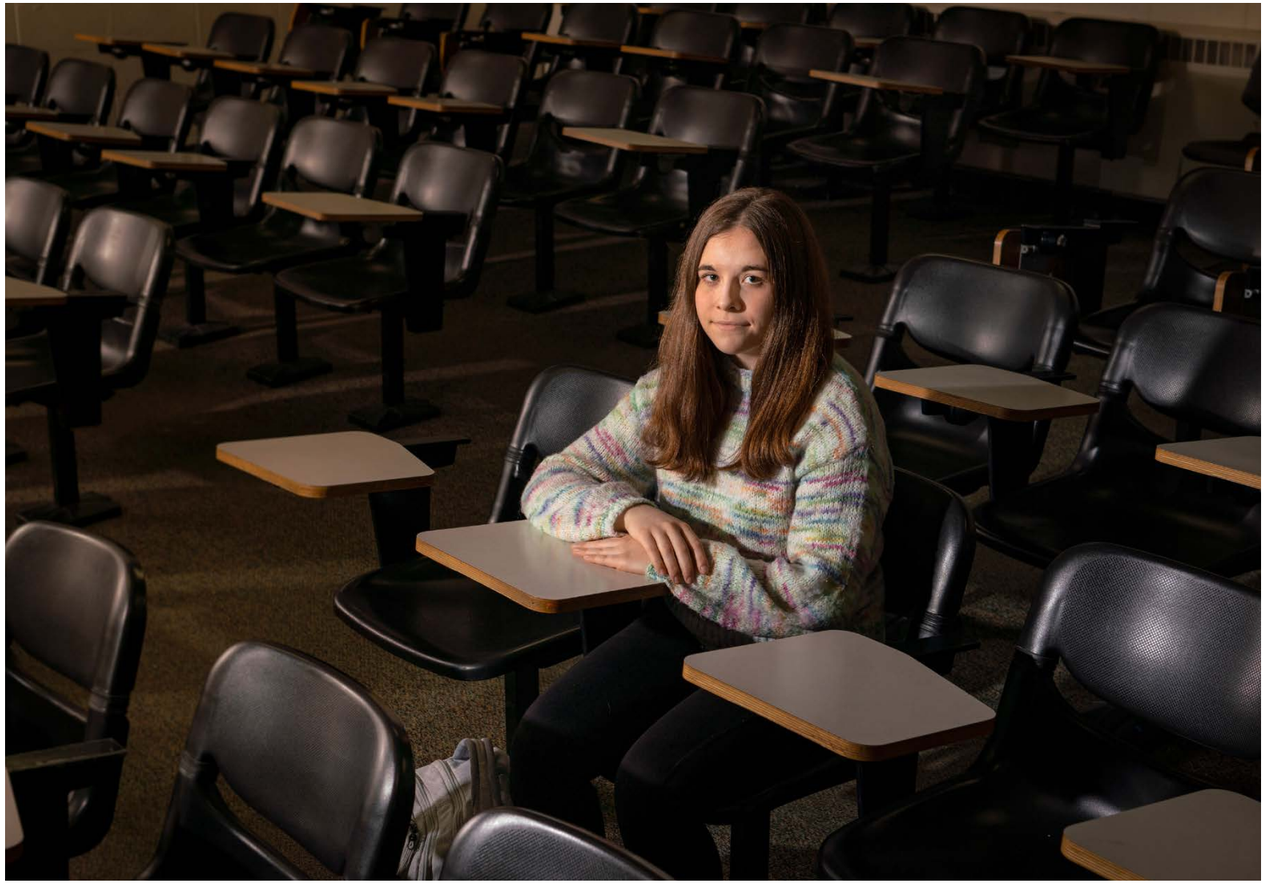


PHOTO BY SHANE OPATZ / UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–EAU CLAIRE

:::

IN MARCH 2018, the Wisconsin Legislature passed Act 143, which requires, among other things, that all schools conduct at least two school violence drills every year. Created in the wake of the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in which a 19-year-old former student killed 17 people and injured 17 others, the act was the latest in a series of state-based efforts to create some semblance of uniformity around school safety—an arena that, until then, had operated something like the Wild West.

During the 2005-06 school year, the estimated percentage of American public schools conducting regular drills, which run the gamut from controlled lockdowns to elaborate Quen-

tin Tarantino-style productions, was 40%. By 2015, that number had ballooned to 95%.

To further streamline these drills, the Wisconsin Department of Justice in 2019 published an 89-page Comprehensive School Security Framework that laid out a set of best practices to help schools plan for violent episodes. Among them were instructions to announce drills in advance, tailor the type of drill to the age of the students, plan accommodations for students with disabilities, use clear language and debrief with each classroom directly following the drill.

In 2021, the National Association of School Psychologists, or NASP, updated its best practices for armed assailant drills to suggest that "schools should not use simulation techniques with students, and exercises should be appropriate to the participants' developmental level and physical abilities"—an assessment that Trish Kilpin, director of the Office of School Safety in the Wisconsin Department of Justice, agrees with.

"We don't need to see blood. We don't need to hear sounds of bullets," Kilpin says. "We certainly don't light a garbage can on fire when we're going to do a fire drill, right? We don't need to simulate that."

Yet, despite NASP's guidance, school districts around the country continue to conduct these sensorial exercises, often to chilling effect. During one such drill in Indiana, elementary school teachers were shot, execution-style, with plastic pellets by local law enforcement, leaving some with welts and bruises. During others, meant to prepare first responders, students were made up to look like victims, complete with hyperrealistic fake wounds. And at a back-to-school training session in Jefferson County, Colorado, in 2019, public school officials handed out buckets and kitty litter to use as makeshift toilets in case of a prolonged lockdown.

Schools have also continued to hold unannounced drills, which proponents argue help staff and students learn to be quick on their toes. At Madison's O'Keeffe Middle and Marquette Elementary schools in 2018, unannounced drills were met with outrage by parents who wrote district officials to say their children were traumatized by them.

The drill that Brooke experienced during her senior year had been run according to plan. Supporters of such drills, including Kilpin, argue that preparing for violent events actually makes students less anxious because it conditions them to act under stress. But there's no real data to back this up. In fact, what little data does exist seems to suggest the opposite.

A July 2020 text message survey of youth ages 14-24 by researchers at the University of Michigan found that over 60% of respondents reported that drills made them feel "unsafe, scared, helpless or sad." The nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety further studied student responses to drills by analyzing millions of social media conversations occurring on Twitter and Reddit among 114 K-12 schools across 33 states. Changes in discourse in the 90 days before and after drills occurred revealed that active-shooter drills were shown to be associated with increases in depression, stress and anxiety.

"I think it's a valid concern," pediatric psychiatrist Ryan Herringa says of the potential for active-shooter drills to cause harm. As director of the University of Wisconsin–Madison's BRAVE Research Center, Herringa studies the effects of adversity and trauma on brain development and family function. He points to a lack of data affirming the drills' value and says, "What's important for kids in these situations, particularly those that are coming from trauma-exposed backgrounds, is to be able to give them agency in the process—that both they and their caregivers know what's going on and have the choice of opting out of a drill or to do it in a different way that feels more controllable for them."

Michael Jones, president of Madison Teachers Inc. and a former Madison Metropolitan School District special education teacher, says that even the simple act of disrupting students' regular routines can be harmful. "All those things that as adults you just kind of roll with really impact young people, and that's especially if they have different abilities," Jones says. "Those are the things that factor into the stress around these drills."

For many of today's high school and college students, it's difficult to remember a time without lockdowns. Aileen Kearney, a senior at Madison East High School and founder of her school's March for Our Lives chapter, recalls receiving lockdown instructions around the same time she was receiving her first-day syllabi. "It would be an intro to the class and then, like, 'Oh, that's the area we would [hide] in,'" she says. "They always told us, 'If you're in the bathroom, stand on the toilets.' I remember that very distinctly."

Adeline Gent, a senior at Koshkonong Trails School in Cambridge who sat on the March for Our Lives Wis-

FIGHT BACK: Madison East High School senior Aileen Kearney *(pictured right)* holds a Magic 8 Ball found in her classroom. In the event of a shooting, students are advised to arm themselves with something that could be thrown at an assailant.

PHOTO BY HILLARY SCHAVE

consin state board with Aileen, nods solemnly. During one lockdown drill in seventh grade, she says, she was crouched under a table with 20 of her classmates when a student started crying.

"It totally blew my mind," she says. "No one should be crying under a table in middle school art class. That should never be happening."

Those kinds of incidents, coupled with a heightened awareness of mass shootings, have created a pressure cooker atmosphere that makes it difficult for students to relax.

"Every time I'm in a lockdown drill it just feels really tense," says Aileen. "In your head you know it's a drill, but what if it's not? What if this is the one time where it's my school? What if I'm going to be the kid in the news next week?"

I WANTED TO UNDERSTAND what was driving this fear. Empirically speaking, schools are among the safest places in the country. Statistically, students like Brooke, Aileen and Adeline are far more likely to get struck by lightning than to be killed in a school shooting. So why are they so terrified?

One potential culprit is as obvious as it is familiar: the media. Since the entire world tuned in to watch teenagers flee a pair of gunmen at Columbine High School in 1999, coverage of such incidents has also increased. School shootings are more likely to garner ratings – or, in contemporary parlance, clicks – than shootings that occur in other public spaces, despite the latter being more common. The frequency with which these events are covered may inflate students' perceived risk of a shooting happening at their school, which can increase stress and anxiety.

Jason Silva, a researcher at William Paterson University who studies media coverage of mass shootings, pored over five decades' worth of New York Times clippings to determine which shootings received the most coverage. He found that, between 1999 and 2016, the Times published around 500 articles on Columbine alone, whereas the average non-school shooting receives fewer than five. (Even the existence of this very article, it could be argued, proves Silva's point.)

Of course, for-profit media enterprises preying on public anxieties is not a new phenomenon. In the 1950s, in the early days of the Cold War, the specter of nuclear strikes led to a proliferation of duck-and-cover drills at American schools. Surveys from this time show 60% of American children reported having nightmares about nuclear war. By the 1980s, those nightmares were replaced by a fear of random kidnappings propagated by television and Freddy Krueger. In both cases, the panics caused by these threats were disproportionate to

THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL SAFETY

1950 – Milwaukee students are among the first to experience surprise duck-and-cover drills in response to the threat of nuclear attacks.

1958 – A fire at Our Lady of the Angels Roman Catholic Church's grade school in Chicago kills 92 children and three nuns, bringing to light the need for better emergency preparedness.

1968 – Spurred by youth activism emerging from the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, the U.S. Senate publishes the first national study on school violence, painting a picture of schools as potentially dangerous places.

1973 – The term "lockdown" is coined by the California Prison System.

Late 1970s – The first lockdown tactics are used in Southern California.

1984 – A high school in New Jersey becomes the nation's first building to install a fail-safe electromagnetic lock on a fire exit.

1994 – Fueled by fears of so-called "superpredators," Congress passes the Gun-Free Schools Act, which requires schools to adopt zero-tolerance policies imposing expulsions on students who bring guns to campus.

1994 – The U.S. Department of Justice establishes the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, or COPS, dramatically increasing the number of police officers in schools.

1999 – A deadly shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado causes schools to formalize lockdown procedures, as well as increase their use of metal detectors and security cameras.

2000 – The ALICE program — short for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate — is introduced by a small private security company based in Texas.

2006 – Ellen and John-Michael Keyes start the "I Love U Guys" Foundation to work on crisis response after a school shooting takes the life of their daughter.

2008 – The Run Hide Fight response strategy is developed by the City of Houston and the Department of Homeland Security in response to terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India.

2012 – A mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut reignites calls for stricter gun control measures across the U.S.

2013 – A bill to ban assault weapons, introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, is defeated in the Senate.

2018 – After a deadly shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, the bipartisan STOP School Violence Act is signed into law, increasing funding for the implementation of evidence-based security measures.

2018 – President Donald Trump calls active-shooter drills in schools "crazy" and "very bad for children."

2019 – Fruitport High School in Michigan becomes the first U.S. school to be rebuilt with concrete barriers in hallways so that students can hide from bullets.

2020 – MMSD votes to remove resource officers from its four high schools.

2022 – Following a deadly shooting at Robb Elementary School in Texas, President Joe Biden signs the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act into law. It is the most significant federal gun reform legislation in almost 30 years.

the actual risks.

Hysteria around school shootings may arise from a distorted view of reality, but it is nevertheless uniquely upsetting. School shootings present a terrifying paradox in that they force us to view schoolchildren both as innocents in need of protection and as monsters capable of mass murder. They also raise the likelihood that a generation burdened with unprecedented levels of anxiety will spend their adulthoods trapped in a state of hypervigilance—a result exacerbated, no doubt, by having spent the better part of three years safeguarding against invisible coronavirus pathogens.

Is it time to rethink these reactive safety strategies? For its part, the Office of School Safety appears committed to being trauma-informed, and school officials are quick to differentiate between active-shooter drills and regular lockdowns, which they claim are far more routine. (In my interviews, more than one source mentioned a dangerous animal loose in the school as potential cause for the latter.) Yet, to the extent that this distinction matters, it appears lost on students, who admit to fearing the worst each time they hear the loudspeaker.

Says Aileen, "Every time there is an instance of something, that's the first place your mind goes."

Adeline agrees. The day before I met with both students over Zoom, Adeline arrived at school only to be prohibited from entering due to a student's medical emergency in the hallway. Even though she was informed the school was in a medical hold, she still feared a shooting.

"My brain immediately clicked to, 'Oh, today might be the day,'" she says. "It's always in the back of my mind, for sure."

IN MY MID-20S, I worked as a middle school English teacher in Japan. On several occasions, I was tasked with participating in my school's armed intruder drills. During these drills, which took place after school without students, a male teacher was selected to don a kendo mask and act as a crazed intruder. (When asked if I wanted to play this role, I declined, thinking the whole foreign invader thing a bit too on the nose.) While this masked man ran through the halls wielding a plastic knife, a few teachers took turns trying to pin him against the wall with a sasumata—a pool skimmer-like contraption mounted with a two-pronged head—while the others shouted at the man to flee.

When I eventually worked up the nerve to ask how this could possibly work in real life ("Do you just say, 'Please wait there and stay very still?'"), my colleagues looked nervously at each other before breaking into laughter. It was as though they were relieved someone finally said what they were already thinking.

What separates these two responses—what allows for laughter in Japan while prompting consternation here in the U.S.—is access to guns. In Japan, a country of more than 125 million people, gun license applicants undergo a thorough background check and mental health screening and must renew their license every three years. As a result, annual gun death rates in the country are typically in the single digits. (A rare case occurred last year, when a lone gunman assassinated former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe using a crude, homemade firearm.)

Comparatively, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that nearly 49,000 people were killed by guns in the U.S. in 2021, shattering the previous record set just one year before. While a variety of factors play into these numbers, it doesn't take a data analyst to see that access to guns is a major contributor.

According to the 2018 Small Arms Survey, an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, civilians in the U.S. owned firearms at a rate of 120.5 per 100 people, an average of more than one gun per person. In Japan, the rate was 0.3 per 100.

Despite the spike in fatal shootings, Wisconsin has been slow to act. While other states were signing "red flag" laws meant to keep guns out of the hands of people believed to present a danger to others or themselves, particularly in the wake of the 2018 Parkland shooting, the Republican-controlled Wisconsin Legislature largely sat on its hands.

Meanwhile, a multibillion-dollar industry has sprung up around fortifying schools themselves. Among the innovations being peddled to schools are bullet-resistant classroom doors from Covenant Security Equipment, bullet-resistant whiteboards from Security Pro USA and the Blackout EZ Classroom Door Lockdown Shade, which proclaims itself "all about safety for school lockdown emergencies" as well as "great for kindergarten nap time." Schools and local governments are blithely paying thousands of dollars for these protections—even as there's little proof that they work.

It's difficult to draw a definitive correlation between gun ownership and a rise in school shootings, but it's clear the failure to address what many see as the issue's root causes has begun to wear on students. Aileen says a great deal of the frustration felt by her peers comes from knowing that the onus of responsibility for school safety has been shifted to the students themselves.

"THERE ARE REALLY SMALL STEPS WE COULD TAKE, SUCH AS FUNDING COMMUNITY VIOLENCE ORGANIZATIONS OR PROVIDING SOLUTIONS TO THE ROOT CAUSES OF GUN VIOLENCE. BUT, INSTEAD, WE ARE TELLING 10-YEAR-OLDS TO ARM THEMSELVES WITH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SUPPLIES. FOR ME, IT'S THIS OVERWHELMING FEELING OF SADNESS."

"We've become this Generation Lockdown," she tells me. "This is something we've grown up around. It's normalized. You could talk to anyone our age and they would be like, 'Yep, I know exactly what to do.' [At the same time], we see clear avenues in which we could start to prevent gun violence. We're not doing them, and that's just so disheartening."

There are signs, too, that parents and educators are beginning to suffer. In the wake of the May 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, a slew of advocacy groups—the National PTA and the American Federation of Teachers among them—published an open letter to Congress in USA Today calling for meaningful action on gun safety and increased research on gun violence. Among the group's grievances was "[widespread] stress as a result of the possibility of mass shooting."

Adeline recalls her fifth grade teacher telling students that, in the event of an actual shooting, she would put herself in harm's way first; however, if "something happened" to her, they should ignore the school's lockdown protocols and instead do whatever they could to survive, including arming themselves with chairs and scissors.

"Why in the world would a fifth grader have to find the nearest pair of scissors and throw it at someone dangerous?" says Adeline. "There are really small steps we could take, such as funding community violence organizations or providing solutions to the root causes of gun violence. But, instead, we are telling 10-year-olds to arm themselves with elementary school supplies. For me, it's this overwhelming feeling of sadness."

Madison resident Katie Joyce shares that sadness. Joyce says she and her husband made the decision not to talk to their oldest daughter, a first grader, about school shootings for fear that she would be unable to distinguish probable from all possible threats. So they were dismayed when she came back from school with a drawing of a man with a gun. "She had never drawn a person with a gun before," says Joyce. "It made me super sad because now I know she knows that this could happen."

Abigail Swetz knows all about this. As a former middle school teacher in Madison, Swetz describes feeling helpless when students would ask her if the drills would work. "Processing with your students, you hope to make sense of the situation, and this is a senseless situation," she says. "I'm very tired, as an education leader and as a classroom teacher, of being expected to solve something that we can't solve. How am I supposed to fix rampant access to guns and radicalization? I can't fix that with a drill. And the students know that, and that's why they're terrified."

She says the drills were especially difficult in the wake of high-profile shootings. "A few weeks after Sandy Hook, we had a drill that was so much harder than any others I had done. The lights are off, you're in a corner, you're hiding under tables, the door is locked, people are jimmying the lock to try to simulate a situation. All these things are adding to a stressful situation. Afterwards, when it went so poorly—people were answering the phone, people were moving a lot, people were talking—I said, 'What's going on?' And they were like, 'Ms. Swetz, we're not being disrespectful, we're scared. Like, this is terrifying.'"

As president of Madison Teachers Inc., Jones says that the threat of school violence alone may not be deterring teachers from staying in the field, but taken together with other occupational stressors, it can have an overwhelming effect.

"If you're a firefighter or a police officer or soldier, you understand that you're putting yourself in harm's way because that's the nature of the job," says Jones. "I come from the generation of young people who were in

high school during Columbine, and in the 25 years since, the conversations around what schools are supposed to be and what they represent have become really stressful. When you add this discussion to all the other discussions we're having, whether we're talking about race or LGBTQ topics or just general funding of public education, then it becomes like, 'OK, I'm expected to protect these children with my life and everything you're telling me as a society is [that] I'm doing a terrible job.'... It begins tipping the scale."

Swetz puts it more bluntly. Speaking at a March for Our Lives rally outside the state Capitol last June, she summed up the situation many educators face in a grim couplet: "Our children are our future... I can't teach the future if the future is dead."

:::

IT'S A GRAY MORNING in December when I pull into the parking lot at Sun Prairie West High School. Opened in 2022, the building epitomizes the 21st century idea of school as citadel. Strategically placed concrete barriers stop me well short of the entrance. An intercom greets me at the front door, where a school secretary buzzes me in.

I'm here to meet with Associate Principal Whalley and a small group of students who make up its student safety ambassadors program. In interview after interview, those I've spoken with have emphasized the need for youth voices to be represented in policy discussions. The safety ambassadors, then, offer a potential way forward.

I meet first with Whalley who, in addition to his duties, has a child who attends school in the district. It was Whalley who first suggested to Brooke that she join the ambassadors. In time, we're joined by two senior ambassadors, Emily Duffek and Laila Jacobson. At first, the students seem hesitant, slouchy in the manner of teenagers who have gotten too little sleep. But as soon as they begin talking about school safety, they perk up.

"One of our main goals here is to lead the other school districts in Wisconsin to get student voices involved," says Laila.

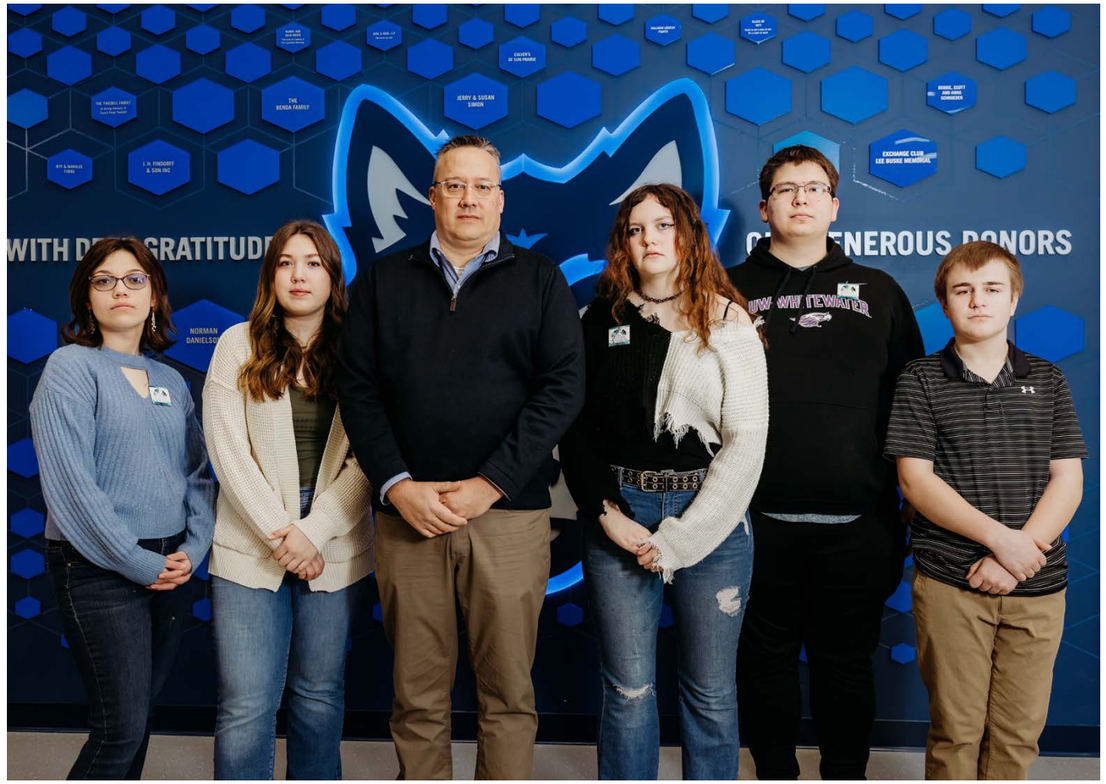
As safety ambassadors, Laila and Emily helped fine-tune the new school's safety features. They also play a role in facilitating active-shooter drills, from helping to develop a scenario to—along with police—monitoring student and staff responses for vulnerabilities. For example, if they notice that a stairway is clogging up during an evacuation, they'll suggest sending students on an alternate route that avoids overcrowding.

While some might think this would make them pariahs, Emily insists their work is appreciated.

"The most powerful thing for me is when people come up to us and ask, 'Oh, are you the ones that did this?' We're like, 'Oh, yeah. Do you want to talk about it?' They're like, 'No, but just, thank you.' We've seen a lot of people tear up or give us hugs. I think that's been the most rewarding, being connected in that way."

STUDENT LED: Sun Prairie West High School student safety ambassadors and Associate Principal Chad Whalley work together to minimize trauma from school drills. Pictured left to right are Emily Duffek, Aliza Kruger, Whalley, Laila Jacobson, Ashton Eull and Ian Graves.

PHOTO BY LARRY CHUA



"WE'VE BECOME THIS GENERATION LOCKDOWN," SHE TELLS ME. "THIS IS SOMETHING WE'VE GROWN UP AROUND. IT'S NORMALIZED."

The ambassadors take concrete steps to prepare for violence, such as winning a grant that would allow Sun Prairie School District to buy Stop the Bleed kits—which include tourniquets and trauma shears, among other items—for each of its three high schools. They also provide solutions to problems that may not have been visible to adults. When Sun Prairie West was coming up with its anonymous reporting protocols, for example, the ambassadors suggested affixing signs with QR codes leading to online resources and posting them only in those places where students were most likely to be alone and unwatched by their peers, such as bathrooms and locker rooms.

The work has been so rewarding, says Laila, that it has inspired her to pursue a career in public policy.

"All my life, I kind of went back and forth [on what I wanted to do]," she says. "And then I went through these experiences and found this sense of community... something kind of sparked."

She's not alone. Swetz, the former middle school teacher, now campaigns for increased youth participation in the world of education policy as communications director for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. At the Office of School Safety, Kilpin recently convened a student advisory board that meets three times a year to provide feedback on existing safety initiatives. And last March, an ad hoc safety committee (formed in the wake of multiple fights at East High School) agreed to multiple measures centering the voices of students, including allowing one student from each Madison high school to vote at school board meetings.

As for Brooke, she's now a freshman at UW–Eau Claire. When I spoke to her over Zoom in December, she was back in Sun Prairie on a break from college, perched atop a Papasan chair that could have been in any 19-year-old's bedroom in the country. A neat row of bowling medals glistened on the wall behind her. Despite the strides she made as a high school safety ambassador, she says she remains nervous about personal safety due to her earlier trauma.

"Looking for exits, always being aware of your surroundings," she says when I ask how that wariness manifests. "I know one of the most common triggers for myself and a lot of my friends, even now, is when that loudspeaker comes on. You kind of go into high alert."

Despite all this, she still keeps tabs on the progress the safety ambassadors are making. "There's a commitment to, 'I want this to be a safe place for myself but also for my peers,'" she says.

Listening to her, I was reminded of the students who spoke up in the wake of the Parkland shooting—determined, articulate, selfless in the face of grief. I was also reminded of something I heard a lot in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, about how resilient young people are.

"She could be president," I write to my editor over email, half believing it. But, as it turns out, Brooke has nobler ambitions.

She's studying to be a teacher.

Jeff Oloizia is a contributing writer at Madison Magazine. jeffoloizia