

My name is Abigail Zwerner.

On January 6, 2023, I was shot in my first-grade classroom by my 6-year-old student who had gotten ahold of the defendant's illegally purchased firearm.

The boy pointed the gun directly at me and shot.

The single bullet went through my left hand and lodged into my upper left chest, leaving traces of bullet fragments in both areas that will remain forever.

As the bullet ruptured my body – as if on a mission to bring me to my death – bones were broken in my left hand and ribs. My left lung collapsed, robbing me of my air supply and causing me to lose consciousness. When this happened and emergency responders worked to keep me alive, I was not sure whether it would be my final moment on earth.

I've undergone five surgeries, and regular, intensive physical therapy appointments to restore motion in my hand.

This tragedy has taken a toll not just on me, but on my family.

My mom and sister had to take time away from their work, and my brother moved his life across the states so he could be here to help.

Having stitches in multiple places on my body from various surgeries, I was not able to take a shower because the stitches and wounds needed ample time to heal. My mom and sister had to use a washcloth with soap to wash me each day, and I had to get my hair washed at a salon.

Due to the pain in my hand, I was not able to do simple tasks such as putting on and taking off clothes, tying my shoes, opening bags, and cutting my food to eat.

I had to stop going to my gym which was part of my daily routine that kept me healthy and in shape. I was unable to walk long distances without getting winded, as my lung recovered from its collapse. I especially could not hold weights in my left hand for exercise.

Recently, the health of my hand has regressed. I still have pain and limited motion. We don't know if it will ever return to normal.

In addition, the aftermath of this monstrous event caused my mental health to rapidly decline.

I lost myself following the shooting. I could barely communicate with my friends and family. I had so many loved ones and friends reach out, and I mentally did not have the capacity to respond.

I suffer from anxiety and depression, and have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I sought and now attend therapy twice a week and utilize general talk therapy as well as eye movement therapy or "EMDR" to cope with these diagnoses.

The shooting has instilled many fears in me that will remain with me forever. I get anxious in crowded places, always looking around to make sure I'm safe. I get scared of seeing a single male walking by himself in fear he might harm me. I am terrified when I see a person wearing a jacket with their hands in their pockets, fearful they might have an illegal firearm in their pocket (like my shooter), waiting for their moment to pounce. I have nightmares of gore, blood, and death, always involving a firearm. I have nightmares of me screaming at people, warning them to run away. I have nightmares of a perfectly good day, suddenly going wrong at the expense of a fired gunshot. I rely on prescribed medication to force myself to sleep because I cannot go to sleep on my own anymore.

The shooting has brought upon a massive wave of financial loss. My bills have been mounting: the ambulance bill, hospital bills, five surgery bills, bills for check-up appointments, occupational therapy appointments and regular therapy appointments. The bills associated with the shooting and my recovery continue to grow week by week.

As a result of the incident and the associated fear and anxiety, I am unable to teach again. I have lost my income. Without a career, I am unsure how I will support myself financially in the future. A master's degree I earned and paid for to advance my career in education now holds no value for me.

My life and once cherished career have been completely turned upside down. I feel as if I have lost my purpose. I loved children, and now I'm scared to have a job involving them. I was in love with my career, and now it's been stripped of me. Now at 26 years old, what am I supposed to do? I don't have a direction, and this makes me depressed.

Having said all of that, I am hopeful that life will get better. Thanks to all the love and support I receive from family and friends, I know that whatever my life holds, it will be one surrounded by their love. The kindness of people close to me, and from those in far places I've never met, is proof that there is good in the world, and I will cling to that idea.

Still, sadly, my life will never be close to the same again.

Not only do I bear physical scars from the shooting that will remain with me forever, I contend daily with deep, psychological scars that plague me during most waking moments and invade my dreams. This permanent damage should never have been allowed to happen to me and would not have happened if not for the defendant's actions or lack thereof.

Thank you.