

# Experts: V-Tech can rebound

*By Hazel Trice Edney  
Special to Sentinel-Voice*  
WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Celeste Peterson paused a moment when asked if she has other children. Slowly, she whispered tearfully into the phone: "She was the only one."

The pain of the loss of Erin Peterson, her and her husband's only child, during the massacre at Virginia Tech, is horrific enough. But, it is exacerbated by the fact that Erin is the second daughter her husband has lost. He had an 8-year-old daughter who died of cancer only two days before Erin was born.

"Erin was his buddy, his buddy," Peterson reminisced warmly, a slight quiver in her voice.

Still, the faith in the Peterson's Centreville, Va., home is strong, in part because Erin's faith was strong.

"She was a prayerful person. She raised the bar for me. I know that she was praying," her mother recalls this week in an interview with the NNPA News Service. "Even when she was a little girl and if she wasn't feeling well, she would say, 'Mama, just lay hands on me and pray for me.'"

It is the faith that this basketball player and scholar put her hands into the hands of God during the final moments of her life that now gives some comfort to this Centreville, Va., couple, Grafton and Celeste Peterson.

But, even with that faith, they grieve for her kindness, the compassion she showed to others in need, and just her presence, relaxing in front of the television. There are thousands of such memories of children and loved ones when joined with other relatives grieving the massacre victims at Virginia Tech. Many struggle to find peace as they are haunted by the memories of April 16, the day that one troubled young man, Seung-Hui Cho, shot and killed 32 students and professors then took his own life.

The Virginia Tech Massacre is, unequivocally, the worst school shooting in the nation's history. But psychologists and clergy who know all too well the torture of gun violence in shell-shocked communities around the country say even though the number in this case is astronomical and the grief unbearable, the healing is always possible.

"In order to handle something as cataclysmic as this

event, particularly because it is so senseless and so sudden, they would have to have a belief system, a faith system; they would have to have a spiritual backdrop or structure in place," said Bishop Noel Jones, pastor of the City of Refuge in Gardena, Calif.

"It's not even necessarily going to church. It would be whatever it is that helps you to stimulate and stir your courage," he said.

Then, they must realize that, "There's no quick fix," said Jones.

"But there is hope wherever people grieve; it's because they have hope and expectation, that this is not the end, that life consists of how we handle death and how we overcome death."

When tragedy strikes, it often hits home in pockets of America far from the scenes shown repeatedly on television news.

Sharon Boyd-Jackson, a clinical psychologist in Union, N.J., says she counseled a second grade teacher last week who was seeking advice on how to talk with her students about the incident, sensing a shift in their moods.

"When you're dealing with children, you really have to come from their perspective," she recounted her advice. "You want to know what their understanding is, you want to know how they're understanding it, you want to know what they're feeling, and so the first thing you do is ask them. You don't even have to mention the specific incident. Just ask if they've heard anything on the news lately that might be bothering them. You want to get to where they are and then help them to process the information."

When processing, children — at home or at school — need to be reassured, she said. "They need to know that they are safe. It is important for parents and teachers to let them know that there is a safety plan, whatever it is, so that they can have some sense of normalcy in terms of their emotions."

Ironically, crisis counselors say that the same comforts that children need in times of crisis, adults also need. When students, staff and faculty returned to classes at Virginia Tech on Monday, they first held an assembly during which they released 33 balloons in remembrance of the victims and Cho. Counselors were on hand for anyone who needed

to talk or needed help with understanding.

Losing a loved one to a violent crime takes time, experts say, particularly when the crime happens in a place where it is least expected.

"In Blacksburg, violence is an anomaly, which means when violence does occur, it tends to have much more of a devastating affect on the people because it's unexpected," said Merlin R. Langley, a clinical psychologist and professor in the Department of Social Work at Florida A & M. University.

"They're shocked, they're bewildered, their basic sense of safety has been disrupted and undermined; [therefore], there is no quick fix," said Jones. "But healing will come," he added.

He concludes that mourners must not feel guilty about going on with their lives, in part, because that's what the lost loved one would have desired.

"You must live your life to the fullest. Realize all your dreams so that the dreams that they did not realize will somehow be fulfilled."

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