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Sandy Hook Survivor, 17, Tells Her Story for First Time Since Tragedy 10 Years Ago: 'I Thought I Was Going to Die'

High school senior Nicole Melchionno is turning tragedy into triumph as a leading advocate for gun safety and making schools safe for kids

By **KC Baker** | Published on December 7, 2022 11:00 AM



Nicole Melchionno. PHOTO: SASHA ARUTYUNOVA

Nicole Melchionno survived the horrific Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and doesn't want any other child to have to endure the nightmare

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...has children have to worry when they go to school," says Nicole, now 17, and a gun violence prevention advocate who spoke to PEOPLE ahead of the 10th anniversary of the Dec. 14, 2012 shooting.

Ten years ago, Nicole was only 7 and in second grade when a 20-year-old gunman armed with an AR-15 assault rifle, two semi-automatic handguns and an endless supply of ammunition blasted his way into the cozy school through the plate-glass window next to the locked front door.

Once inside, he turned left instead of right, where Nicole's classroom was located, and opened fire, killing 20 terrified first graders and 6 educators in the nation's first mass shooting at an elementary school — and one of the worst in U.S. history.

Trembling in fear, Nicole huddled with her teacher and classmates next to their jackets and hats in their coat cubbies as the crack of gunfire echoed through the halls. "The intercom was left on, so everything was amplified," she says.

 Grab Cut Insert Cut Grab Cut Insert Cut Grab Cut Insert Cut Mass Shooting at Connecticut Elementary School

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Sitting toward the front of the room, she worried that if the gunman came into her classroom, that she would be one of the first to be shot.

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"I thought I was never going to see my family again," she says. "I was scared that I was going to die."

For more on Nicole Melchionno, listen below to our daily podcast PEOPLE Every Day.

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When law enforcement arrived, Nicole and her classmates and teacher ran to a nearby firehouse, where she was later reunited with her family.

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Like others who lived through the unspeakable horrors of that day, she remains scarred from the trauma she endured. After the shooting, she had terrible nightmares and trouble going to sleep. Like so many others who survived the shooting, she was also plagued with anxiety.

 Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) speaks at a rally demanding the Senate pass an assault weapons ban, alongside two survivors of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting

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She has learned to manage her anxiety, which has lessened over the years. But being in big crowds and “not knowing if someone has a gun can re-trigger me at times,” she says.

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As Nicole kept hearing about the increasing number of school shootings that kept taking place after Sandy Hook, she decided to turn tragedy into triumph by fighting to end gun violence. In 2018, when she was in eighth grade, she started to become involved in gun violence prevention. “It’s just so painfully common in this country,” she says.

She took part in March for Our Lives, a student-led mass demonstration in March 2018 in Washington, D.C., to push for gun control legislation.

“It was empowering,” she says.

For more on Nicole Melchionno and the 10th anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting, [subscribe now to PEOPLE](#) or pick up *this week’s issue, on newsstands Friday.*

In 2020, when she was a sophomore, she joined the Junior Newtown Action Alliance, which is part of the local gun violence prevention group [Newtown Action Alliance](#), and became its legislative coordinator the following year.

But it was the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas, in May — which killed 19 students and two teachers — that moved her to take action.

“It sparked something in me,” she says. “I felt that I needed to do more.”


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issue.”

Since then, she has spoken publicly at news conferences in Connecticut and at rallies in D.C. She’s also traveled several times to the nation’s capital, including in July to celebrate the historic June 24 signing of the Bipartisan Gun Bill on the White House lawn.

In the fall, she worked with March for Our Lives lobbying senators on Capitol Hill about an assault weapons ban.

 July 11th at the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act celebration at the White House- nicole with Chloe, a survivor of the Uvalde shooting

Nicole with Chloe, a survivor of the Uvalde shooting. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NICOLE MELCHIONNO

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lame duck session," she says, referring to the last chance for Democrats to push through their legislative priorities before Republicans take control of the House of Representatives in January.

She is returning this month with other teens to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Sandy Hook shooting at the Annual National Vigil for All Victims of Gun Violence.

In between her activism, she is a regular teenager, spending time with her friends, going to the movies and hitting the local Starbucks.

The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society named her one of its students of the year in March for raising money and awareness for the disease.

She's applying to college now, with plans to study public policy and maybe business.

As a member of Gen Z, she says, "gun violence is one of our top priorities because we really are the only generation that's had to grow up through this.

"I am hopeful for the future," she says.

"But more needs to be done."


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