

Good Morning, first and foremost I would like to thank congress for allowing me the opportunity to speak and share my story. My name is Faith Mata, I am 21 years old and coming up on my last semester of college preparing for my future. A new future without my little sister Tess and a future of having to navigate this life without her.

I was an only child for quite some time, it was just myself and my parents Veronica and Jerry. Being alone was hard and a lesson of being independent. When I reached 10 my parents had a conversation with me to let me know they would not be having any more children, it would just be me. I remember crying and begging for them to please bring me a sibling, I didn't want to grow up alone. Not even three months later my mom got a phone call letting her know she was pregnant and I was going to be a big sister. I can still recall the days going with my mom to her appointments, seeing the sonograms, and then finding out Tess was a girl. All up until the day she was born February 6th, 2012.

Bringing Tess into our life was a blessing in disguise. My sister brightened our darkest days, Tess was the outspoken, courageous, daring, determined, and nurturing person in our family. Our family was whole at this point, we would have family night every Sunday where my dad would put on movies or suggest we play some board games. Tess convinced my parents to bring our mattresses into our living room and we would all sleep in the same room. Those days were the best no matter how annoying it was sleeping next to her. It was an unsaid tradition of taking countless road trips every summer to a new destination we had never been before and spending time just as family. We were so happy, my family was perfect in my eyes.

Then came the time for me to move two and a half hours away from home, to begin my college career. It was hard being away from home and not being able to see my sister grow day by day. Every time I came home to visit Tess she was getting bigger and smarter before my eyes. It is a beautiful thing to see as an older sibling. But being the older sibling it was my duty and obligation to be her role model and the person whom Tess admired, she was my purpose and strength to be the best I could be. It was always bittersweet having her run out of our house

to come and greet me with hugs and smiles. And it hurt seeing her cry and beg me to stay just a little longer when I had to leave back home. Even though I was away at college our bond was strong and it was so precious to me and to her. We talked numerous times of her attending my soon to be alma mater and how she would live with me while she went to school. We were planning our futures to make sure we would always be together.

May 24th, 2022. I was getting ready for work around noon when my cousin had alerted me to call my mom. My mom said "it's okay, the officers said it was a barricaded subject." I proceeded to call my dad. He is standing in front of Robb Elementary and tells me "there are so many people here it looks like a war zone." Fast Forward about an hour news goes around a teacher has been shot along with eight students. My heart sinks but still not knowing who the teacher is or the kids. My thoughts were it's not my sister it can't be, this would never happen to us. Then full panic kicks in and my mom calls to tell me that "they're moving kids to the civic center and no luck with finding Tess." Dots start connecting that the teacher was in fact my sisters and many of the kids that were considered missing were all in the same two classes room 111 and 112. My roommate drove me back to Uvalde where along the way I was calling hospitals in San Antonio, Texas looking for my sister. After 2 hours of driving I was at the civic center with my parents where we waited in a room with other family members. We waited about 8 and a half hours before we found out my sister was among the 21 that were deceased.

The days following the death of my sister, I took on the responsibilities and tasks that my mom and dad could not bear to do. My parents should not have to plan their own child's funeral so I felt the need step in when they needed me the most. Our life has changed forever; it has darkened because our light has left. The child and little human who once made this family whole is no longer with us. Tess will never get to experience the life we had prayed she would live, she will never graduate high school, never fall in love herself, never be present at my wedding, and we will never know how scared she was in her last moments in that classroom. All we have left

is this quietness which was onced filled with her laughter and this stillness that only Tess could help us move out of.

Today I am here sharing my story but are we not tired of hearing the stories of victims' families? Are we not tired of hearing of yet another tragedy because of gun violence? When is enough enough? I truly hope that this never happens to any other family and in the days, months, or years to come this debatable topic on assault rifles is not brought up again because someone's child or sibling was murdered. You may never understand what my family is going through and you don't have to, but today you can make a change to help families never have to feel what the families of Uvalde, Texas and the many other mass shootings have felt.