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## COLUMN: The shoes and the night I will never forget

Lizi Arbogast Gwin

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When I got a text at midnight Saturday saying there might have been a shooting in Dadeville, I never thought I'd be walking into the disaster I did.

I called our news reporter, Will Marlow, and told him I'd run up there and just to hang back, call Tallapoosa County Sheriff Jimmy Abbett or Dadeville Police Chief Jonathan Floyd. "Just see if you can get a quick update, ask them what's up," I said.

When I turned the corner off Highway 280 a mere 14 minutes later, I was shocked. Blue lights blinded me. From every direction, the lights spun in their circles across the black night. I still had no idea what was happening, but I felt like I couldn't breathe.

I immediately spoke to an officer on scene at 12:05 a.m. Sunday, and he said he couldn't tell me anything but a press conference was coming soon. (Who knew "soon" meant 10 ½ hours later? But that's a column for another day.) So I walked around, I listened, I watched as people cried and screamed, begging for answers and for their children.

After about 30 minutes or so on scene, I found an officer who told me where the crime scene was and how to get closer. I walked down the alley next to Dadeville City Hall. There was almost no one there at this time; don't forget. It wasn't till hours later when the news media started arriving and people from around the area crowded in.

In that moment at 12:30 a.m. though, I was on my own, walking down a dark alley knowing I was coming up on a crime scene. Was this really my life? I couldn't fully comprehend this was actually happening.

When I first saw the crime scene though, I knew. I texted my brother and said to him, "Friend, I think we've had a mass shooting."

My whole body felt deflated. I didn't want it to be true. It couldn't be true.

But as I saw the many pairs of abandoned shoes just outside the doorway of Mahogany Masterpiece, I knew. When I saw bullet holes in the windows, I knew. When I heard families in utter, raw, unfiltered grief, I knew.

I knew our town was never going to be the same again.

Then I sat, and I waited. For hours and hours, I sat next to American Tax just across Broadnax Street from the dance studio. I watched as the Crime Scene Unit truck got there. I watched as they brought out those haunting yellow evidence markers.

Those yellow markers were everywhere.

I watched as investigators put the markers all around the shoes — around the parking lot between Mahogany and PNC, even in the roadway of Broadnax Street not 30 feet from where I was sitting. I saw photographers enter, and later the coroner. I've watched enough true crime to know what was happening almost every step of the way.

I kept my focus on those shoes, though. Then all of sudden, the investigators were done and they started bagging everything up. In brown paper bags like you'd take to school for lunch, the little yellow markers were put away. The evidence was gathered.

The shoes were bagged, and something about that felt so final to me. I had been watching those shoes for hours. Knowing they had been on the feet of teenagers. The bright oranges and neon greens stood out like a flash of life amongst a scene of heartache. Those shoes were just the right fit for a bunch of youngsters, dressed to the nines and having a blast.

Then they were gone.

And I don't know if we'll ever be the same again.

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