

Shooter

By Rhys McVay

It's all your fault. Why weren't you there? It should have been you. Maybe if you were there, you could have done stopped it. All these are phrases that raced through my head that fateful day. I remember it as if it all happened yesterday. The worst part of it all? It was supposed to be one of the best days of my life.

I went to a small high school about 15 miles south of Spokane, Washington called Freeman High School. We went by the Scottie's, one of those black dogs with furry chins, like a Schnauzer. It was a tight-knit community where everyone knew everyone, mainly because there were only 250 students that were lucky enough to call Freeman home. We wore that name with pride and honor. I would let everyone know that I went to Freeman. My biggest pride of going to freeman? The basketball team. I was our starting point guard who had helped lead us to two straight state championships (along with my several amazing teammates), where we unfortunately lost both times that we made it. Those were two of the worst days of my life. I felt like I let the whole community down, but everyone continually showed us love and support. This is what made playing for Freeman so great. This is why we loved wearing that name: to represent the community that welcomed us all in with open arms and showed up to every game, selling out the gym and leaving no empty seats. I would do anything for that community to this day, as it gave me everything I have in my life.

I always wanted to play college basketball, but playing at a smaller school, it was tough to get recognized. That's why I have never been more nervous, or excited, when the head coach of Rocky Mountain College, up in Billings, Montana, asked me to go visit their campus and hang

out with the team to see how I would fit in. We set the visit for Wednesday, September 13 and started getting ready.

The day was finally here, my first official college basketball visit. I had dreamed of the moment my whole life, so for this day to come was magical. My Mom was a little worried that I was going to be missing school, but she didn't mind too much, as I hadn't missed a day of school since seventh grade. Plus, it was my senior year, so it's not like I was too worried about falling behind in school.

That drive felt like it took forever. My palms were sweating, and my mind was racing, as I gripped onto the thing that has brought me peace and tranquility my whole life: that beautiful, round, orange, worn down Spalding basketball. Finally, we arrived in Billings about an hour early, so we decided to go downtown for a bit and get breakfast.

“Are you nervous?” my Dad pondered.

“No,” I replied shakily.

“Don't worry, this will be the start of great things to come for you. Just go out and play your game,” he reassured me.

It was time to go to campus and meet up with the coach. I was shocked when I shook his hand and he said, “how are y'all doin.” He sounded and acted just like Matthew McConaughey. He had the same mannerisms, accent, and everything. He was extremely hospitable and asked us a ton of questions that I can't even remember because I was in such awe at how beautiful the campus was.

As time went on, I became more and more confident. I was ready to get a workout in and go play against what I hoped to be my future teammates, but first, we had to eat lunch with some of the players. They were incredibly nice, and the food was incredible, but both my dad and I kept feeling our phones buzzing in our pockets repeatedly. Not wanting to be rude, we didn't pull our phones out to look at them, but they wouldn't stop going off. It sounded like a beehive was located below our seats. Finally, lunch ended, and we could both check our phones. I had to go to the bathroom first though, and I never bring my phone into the bathroom, as I have a ridiculous fear of dropping my phone in the toilet.

I remember walking out to my Dad and seeing him sitting on a bench, hands in his head.

“You doing ok?” I asked with a smile on my face.

“I have awful news,” he responded. My smile quickly faded. I knew it was something bad because my dad doesn't joke about these things. He continued, “there was a shooting at Freeman. One dead, three injured.”

I didn't say anything. All I did was sit down and stare straight ahead. No sadness, no fear, just shock. You hear about these things happening on the news, but it's not supposed to happen at your school. You're supposed to be safe at your school. My dad and I both just sat there in silence for about five minutes. He then put his arm around me.

“We have to go to your workout now if you're up for it.”

I just sat there and asked for just a couple minutes to check my phone and text my friends to make sure they were ok. Thankfully they had all already texted me saying things like “we're ok” and “don't worry about us, make sure you have fun on your visit.” All I could feel was guilt and shame for not being there.

Just another normal school day. In fact, it was even better than a normal school day, because today, there was a two-hour late start. The typical friend group, the basketball players and their good friends, were just downstairs talking before they had to head to first period. Making their usual stupid, yet hilarious jokes together, they hear a loud bang, followed by several more. They hear screams and the ceiling above them starts to rumble, like a herd of wildebeests are above them. They see people sprinting down the stairs and screaming. Not knowing what's going on they all ran as fast as they could to the door and kept running.

That was the worst workout I have ever been through in my entire life. While I didn't play badly, my mind was elsewhere. Who was shot, who died, who was the shooter? Thoughts kept racing my mind. I asked if I could go to the bathroom quick, and I just sat in there and cried for a while. I thought about my friends. I had first period with one of my best friends, so everyday we would leave our friend group early and walk upstairs to get ready for class. Today, however, he didn't go to class early because I wasn't there. Thank God he didn't either, as our first class was right next to where the shooting occurred. What if I had been there and we were walking to class when the shooting started. Then I started getting darker thoughts. What if I had been up there to stop the shooter. Could I have done something to prevent this?

I walked out of the bathroom and went to hug my dad. Then, I finished my workout, played with the other players and it was time for us to head back home. I didn't get a wink of sleep that night, just sitting in the car, thinking. Wondering how this could have happened at my school.

It had been one week since the shooting. No school the whole week, as they gave us time to cope and recover from the incident. I spent everyday in my driveway shooting hoops. I

learned a day after the shooting that the kid who had been killed died because he stood in front of the gun trying to save others. He was a true hero.

The first day back to school was weird, to say the least. There were no classes, just people hugging each other and crying. They brought in a bunch of grief counselors to talk to all the students too. I have never been good at talking about my feelings, so I just went off alone to get shots up in the gym. I didn't feel like I was allowed to be impacted by this because I wasn't there. That was when my coach came in and asked me why I was shooting.

"I just gotta get my mind off some things Coach," I responded.

"It's ok to ask for help Rhys. You're allowed to be sad from time to time," he coached. I just continued to shoot, then he came up and gave me a big hug. I didn't know how much I needed that, as I started to tear up while we embraced. I knew how hard of a time he was having with all this. When one of the people was shot, he dragged her into his classroom and ripped off part of his shirt to apply pressure to her wound. She lived because he put himself in harms way to save her. And yet, here he was, hugging me and making sure that I was ok. He told me that even if I was there, there's nothing I could have done. The kid had a gun, and I would have no chance to do anything if he aimed it at me.

I learned from this how important it was to talk to people about how you feel. I went to see a therapist for the next year, and it was one of the best decisions I've ever made. More importantly are the friendships that I had in my life at the time. We got through it all together. We played basketball, talked, went to football games, and did everything together from there on out. While this was the worst day of my life, it made me realize just how important the people in my life are to me. You have to take advantage of the relationships that you have in your life,

because you never know when that is going to come to and end. Cherish every friend, family member, and especially, every memory.