

Testimony of Steven Curtis Chapman
Early Childhood, Youth and Families Subcommittee
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. My name is Steven Curtis Chapman and I am a singer and songwriter living in Nashville, Tennessee. It is an honor to have the opportunity to speak to you today about an issue that greatly burdens my heart.

I became involved with the issue of school violence on the Monday following Thanksgiving in 1997. My family and I had just returned from my hometown of Paducah, Kentucky. It was not a surprise when my phone rang early that morning—I figured that it was my father just checking to see if we made it home safely. What I heard from him dramatically changed my life.

That morning, a student at my alma mater, Heath High School, opened fire on a group of classmates involved in an early-morning prayer group at the school. My wife and I quickly repacked our family and returned to Paducah that evening.

When we arrived, everyone was in a state of shock. There were few tears—more just looks of disbelief. Was this a dream? By the end of the week, when it was time for the funerals of the three teenage girls who were killed, the full extent of the nightmare weighed heavily on the community.

I was asked to sing at the joint funeral service held for Jessica, Nicole, and Kasey. I went to the funeral as a friend—I was still very much a part of the community in Paducah.

But when my wife and I walked in, what really overwhelmed us was the sudden realization that we were there as parents. If we'd stayed in Paducah, this could have been our daughter, Emily.

Months after the shootings in Paducah, I gave a memorial concert. At that time, residents were just beginning to wrestle with getting on with their lives. Wanting to do something more to help end these tragedies, I turned to two friends: Ken Carpenter of Franklin Films, who had produced music videos for me; and Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministries. Mr. Colson had once said to me, "We're experiencing the death of conscience in this generation of young people in America." And when this shooting happened, it brought that truth home in a powerful way for me.

As a result, Chuck Colson; Neighbors Who Care, the crime victim ministry of Prison Fellowship; and Franklin Films joined together with me on ***Bulletproof?***, a powerful youth violence prevention package.

Neighbors Who Care President Lisa Lampman, who is here today, provided keen insight on the development of ***Bulletproof?*** When I first called Lisa about this idea, she had recently returned from Jonesboro, Arkansas, where she served on the National Organization of Victim Assistance's (NOVA) crisis-response team that was called in after the shooting at Westside Middle School in March of 1998. While there, Lisa had the opportunity to witness firsthand the devastating impact of school violence. She, too, was eager to find a way to help students, parents, teachers, and the community understand and address this issue.

The first component of ***Bulletproof?*** is a dynamic drama entitled, ***at the edge***. The film's plot follows a 16-year old student whose life unravels to the verge of committing an act of violence in his high school. The second component is a hard-hitting documentary on school violence, also entitled ***Bulletproof?*** which explains why school violence happens and what students can do to stop it from happening again. Both are designed for youth audiences and the adults who live and work with them—parents, teachers, church youth leaders, and youth professionals. Along with accompanying discussion guides, these films provide an ideal way to help both teens and adults to understand what contributes to youth violence and develop ideas and plans on how to stop violence in their own schools and communities.

The ***Bulletproof?*** package helps teens know and read the warning signs. In almost every case, perpetrators of school violence confide their plans to others before they commit an act of violence. We need to help our youth end the “conspiracy of silence.” Young people need to know how to spot the signs of impending tragedies and tell a parent, a teacher, or an authority about a potentially violent act before it happens.

That is a heavy responsibility for our young people. But it's part of what it means for teens to be leaders in their schools today. These films provide a unique tool to equip our young people to be the agents of hope and transformation in their schools through the love and power of Jesus Christ. Education alone won't change behavior. Behavior is changed when hearts are transformed. That is why ***BulletProof?*** presents a faith-based perspective on youth violence prevention.

This is so important because as the Pearl, Paducah, Jonesboro, Springfield, and Littleton incidents so graphically prove, this kind of violence can happen anywhere and

at any time. Although crime rates have dropped over the last several years, the one segment of the population where crime is skyrocketing is among our young people. The Department of Justice reports that youth under age 25 make up almost 50 percent of serious violent crime victims and almost 56 percent of rape/sexual assault victims. Crime inflicts lifelong pain on young people—not only those who are victimized, but also on those who witness violence. A growing body of research indicates that children and youth who see violence experience the same long-term reactions as those who are victimized themselves. Today, 43 percent of male adolescents and 35 percent of female teens have witnessed some form of violence firsthand.

Similarly, growing percentages of students fear that they will be attacked or harmed at school. According to the National Education Association (NEA), each day in America, 160,000 children miss class because of the fear of being physically harmed. This is understandable given the fact that the NEA also reports that more than 100,000 children now bring some sort of weapon to school every day.

How can we make sense of this devastating series of school murders? The Bible makes two things clear about humanity. First, we are created in the image of God and the knowledge of right and wrong is implanted in every human heart. We're also warned that we live in world where evil exists. These facts require any civilized society to make the moral and spiritual training of its young people its number one priority. This must take place everywhere—at home, in church, in school and throughout our popular culture. Children must be taught to consciously pursue right and good instead of evil.

But we live in an era when families have broken down, and busy parents can neglect their duties. The Church sounds an uncertain trumpet. And schools don't dare to teach right and wrong because it's considered politically incorrect.

The fact is that our communities do not share a moral standard on which to base the informing and training of the conscience. The messages our kids are getting is that morality is whatever you chose it to be, and nobody has the right to prescribe any ethical standards.

So what do we end up with? Normal-looking kids who commit cold-blooded murders. My friend Chuck Colson often quotes the criminologist James Q. Wilson who says that all his studies have led to the same conclusion: crime begins when children are not given adequate moral training, when they do not develop internal restraints on impulsive behavior.

Is there truly any hope that we can reverse this devastating trend? Yes! But this hope is not found through installing more metal detectors or enacting legislative solutions. Although they may help—individually they will not accomplish what needs to happen. We all must be focused on transforming young hearts and minds, transforming our culture, and living as role models ourselves.

I believe that ***Bulletproof?***, because of its faith-based perspective, has the potential to address the problem of youth violence throughout our country—in urban, suburban and rural areas. My hope is that ***Bulletproof?*** will cause young people who may be disconnected, desperate, or foolish to say, “life isn't like a video game where you just hit the reset button after killing everyone—this is reality.” For a teen who is thinking

sensibly, but has a friend or acquaintance who may be potentially violent, it might encourage him or her to step up and say something and stop violence before it happens.

If ***Bulletproof?*** helps save one kid's life, sets one kid on track for a healthier life, or ultimately leads one kid to the realization of God's love, then all the time, thought and prayer that has gone into ***Bulletproof?*** is worth it. But I believe it will impact more than just one kid. And that gives me hope that together we can help stop the violence committed by and against our youth.

I also want to continue to offer my prayers to the communities that have been affected by youth violence, especially Littleton as the grieving and mourning is so heavy at this time. I have attached the lyrics of a song that I wrote after the shootings at Heath High School. "With Hope" is a song about untimely death and has been sent to Littleton and Denver-area churches and youth pastors following the recent shootings there. I pray that they sense and know the amazing sense of God's grace and love embracing them.

Mr. Chairman, again, I am honored to have the opportunity to bring a faith-based perspective to this current and continuing issue. I look forward to working together with you, members of the subcommittee, and others across our country to end the tragedy of youth violence.

Thank you.

Attachment: "With Hope" lyrics

With Hope

1Thess. 4:13-14 / Heb. 6:9, 10:23

This is not at all how
We thought it was supposed to be
We had so many plans for you
We had so many dreams
And now you've gone away
And left us with the memories of your smile
And nothing we can say
And nothing we can do
Can take away the pain
The pain of losing you, but ...

We can cry with hope
We can say goodbye with hope
'Cause we know our goodbye is not the end, oh no
And we can grieve with hope
'Cause we believe with hope
(There's a place by God's grace)
There's a place where we'll see your face again
We'll see your face again

And never have I known
Anything so hard to understand
And never have I questioned more
The wisdom of God's plan
But through the cloud of tears
I see the Father's smile and say well done
And I imagine you
Where you wanted most to be
Seeing all your dreams come true
'Cause now you're home
And now you're free, and ...

We have this hope as an anchor
'Cause we believe that everything
God promised us is true, so ...

We wait with hope
And we ache with hope
We hold on with hope
We let go with hope

written by Steven Curtis Chapman
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