

Chaplains Help Newtown Find 'New Normal'

The words were so powerful yet they summed up what everyone in Newtown, Conn., has been thinking.

One mother, who lost her child in the Sandy Hill Elementary School shooting, kept repeating the same line over and over after collapsing into the arms of a Rapid Response Team chaplain.

"I just can't believe he's gone."

Nobody can. Yet life moves on in this small community torn apart by senseless violence, even when families of the victims have not.

"People are not supposed to bury their children," chaplain Carolin Perez said. "I think they will begin to put one foot in front of the other, but it's difficult.

"It affects your ability to trust. And I don't think they'll ever be the same."

Carolin and her husband, Desi, were two of 27 crisis-trained chaplains from the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team, who have ministered to more than 700 in the Newtown community.

Sometimes it's simply providing a listening ear. Other times it's a quick prayer. But mostly, the chaplains are there to give a "ministry of presence" in an unspeakable time such as this.

Carolin, who has a degree in counseling, recalled one hour-long conversation with a victim's family member, where 15 minutes were spent in silence, except for constant sobs. "We just held him and let him weep," Carolin said. "Not everyone is comfortable in that type of setting, but because of the

training we've had as chaplains we can meet that need."

Still, Carolin knows that there's only One who can truly comfort during these immense levels of hurt – and the Rapid Response Team has been nothing more than a conduit of the hope and love of Christ.

"We've been able to see the power of God's comfort and presence in a time of horrific sorrow," Carolin said. "And how He is indeed able to meet people where they are at in the grieving process – because everyone grieves differently.

"The Lord has been able to meet their needs and comfort them in a way that no one else is able to."

On Thursday, students went back to school for the first time at Chalk School, which has been renamed Sandy Hook in nearby Monroe, Conn. Comfort dogs roamed the halls of the new Sandy Hook Elementary School, while each student was allowed one parent to come along.

"It was a little bit tough to see, from the standpoint that the school looked like a military base with all the guards out front," Carolin said. "A lot of police cars, policemen – just a high level of security.

"But it was very sweet from the standpoint that on the lengthy drive into the school there were a lot of signs from people showing their support, saying the community was praying for them."

Two of the three make-shift memorials have been taken down, including the one across the street from the fire station with 26 trees – one for every victim who died at the school.

The final memorial, just off Interstate 84 on Exit 10 – and less than a half mile from the school – is a tent where people have brought flowers, stuffed animals, banners and other remembrances.

"The community is saying we're ready to move on and think of ways to heal and not be constantly reminded about what's happened here," Carolin said.

Still, there is an urgent need for prayer as Newtown tries desperately to turn the page.

"Things will never be the same, but we ask you to pray as the kids return to school and the community begins to seek 'the new normal,' " said Jack Munday, international director of the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team. "Most of all, please continue to pray for the families of those dear little children and the teachers and administrators who died that day. They need our prayers as much as ever."

The outpouring of love and support has made a lasting imprint on the Newtown community, according to the chaplain.

Visitors from Nigeria and Korea who were visiting the U.S. have come to Newtown express their sympathy. Some traveled from North Carolina and Alabama to offer prayers and support.

"They've been overwhelmed at the magnitude of support they've received," Carolin said.

Just as the chaplains themselves have been overwhelmed.

"The families have expressed their appreciation," Carolin said. "The churches, the businesses, even one of the diners. We were there three different times to eat and they wouldn't allow us to pay for our check. We finally told them we couldn't come back unless they let us pay.

"They've been very, very appreciative."