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## One year after school massacre, statement on behalf of Amish

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Text of a statement issued Wednesday on the approach of the one-year anniversary of the Oct. 2, 2006, shootings at an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pa., that left five girls dead and five wounded.

The Nickel Mines Accountability Committee, an all-volunteer panel of Amish and non-Amish organized to handle donations, said it was releasing the statement on behalf of the community and families affected by the shootings.

The Nickel Mines Accountability Committee was organized two days after a gunman shot ten girls at the West Nickel Mines Amish School in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania to receive contributions and apply them to the needs that resulted from the shootings. Donors from all over North America and a number of other countries contributed more than \$4.3 million in the several months after the tragic happening. About one-third of the funds have been utilized to date and plans are underway to place the balance in a trust fund for the ongoing expenses of victims of the tragedy.

The all-volunteer committee met frequently in the first months and still meets regularly to allocate the funds. Bishops of the Amish church appointed nine persons to the committee, seven Amish and to community members who are not Amish. The Committee selected a non-voting spokesperson to assist them and the families with publicity.

The funds have been utilized for medical, rehabilitative surgery, physical therapy and counseling services, for transportation for victims and families at the time of the event and for care since then, for extra living expenses for families attending to the victims, for lost income and extra expenses on the farms and in the businesses of the families, and for personal care and renovations to make the home of the most seriously wounded girl handicap accessible. The committee has also made contributions to the charity funds of several medical providers that gave medical service, to some of the volunteer public service entities that responded to the event and will pay for some special rescue equipment public authorities can use in similar emergencies. A contribution was also made to Marie Roberts.

Contributions have been adequate to cover current expenses. Long term costs for home care for one of the victims, corrective surgery for several others, and counseling for the victims, family members and others affected by the tragedy are projected to be substantial. Based on analysis by medical professionals, on projected ongoing home care expenses and on the potential for unpredictable medical or counseling needs the Accountability Committee decided to place all the unspent funds, plus future contributions, in a trust account which will be overseen by members of the Amish community.

Messages of condolence, gifts and offers of all kinds of assistance poured into the community for months. The families of all the school children and the community of Nickel Mines are deeply thankful for the care shown to them and frequently are heard to lament that they cannot personally thank each person who showed kindness to them.

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Additional funds were contributed to the school committee for construction of New Hope Amish School. Classes moved from a temporary location set up the week after the shooting to the new school in April. The 2007 Fall school term started the week before Labor Day. Some new students have joined the school, which is taught by the same teacher as in the previous year. Parents have voiced appreciation for the continuity and stability the teacher provides for the students. The children are reported to be enjoying their classes but they keenly miss the girls who died.

No public anniversary memorial events are planned by the community. It is expected that the school will be closed over the time of the anniversary. However, the approaching anniversary and the public attention to it intensifies the awareness of the loss of loved ones and the painful injuries of the survivors, as it does in any community that experiences such a tragic happening. To the casual observer "life goes on" in Nickel Mines, with its daily and seasonal demands of work, school, births, family and church, but for the families each day brings with it the pain, grief and questions that remind them of their loss.

The strength of community in Nickel Mines helps the families cope with this event that changed their lives forever. Sharing their experiences with family and friends in the church community through frequent visiting and repeated conversation, along with constantly available help in their work and other needs, are essential components of the healing process. But the families and others in the community are also utilizing professional counseling services as they feel need to assist them in developing ways to cope with the emotional trauma from their losses or from survivor's guilt.

For some, reaching out to others who have suffered similar tragedy is part of their own healing. Recently 29 people, mostly members of families from the Nickel Mines School, traveled to Blacksburg, Virginia to meet with school officials and families of the Virginia Tech shootings to show their concern and to deliver the Comfort Quilt that had been given to Nickel Mines.

The forgiveness extended by the Amish community to the Roberts family was noted around the world. The Amish did not wish such publicity for doing what Jesus taught and want to make sure that glory is given to God for that witness. Many from Nickel Mines have pointed out that forgiveness is a journey, that you need help from your community of faith and from God, and sometimes even from counselors, to make and hold on to a decision to not become a hostage to hostility. It is understood that hostility destroys community.

Families of the surviving girls and community members are heard talking about the "miraculous" recovery of the surviving girls. Some medical providers have commented about the remarkable recovery that exceeded expectations. The community gives credit to God and to the many prayers for this healing.

Four of the five injured girls have been in school since December 2006. Two of the four have missed some school days for rehabilitative therapy or corrective surgery but have kept up with their school assignments. Keeping up the routines of school and family life as much as possible have been important sources of stability for the children and their families.

While the Amish eschew publicity and prefer not to discuss their personal experiences in public the families of the injured girls have indicated they want to give an update on their daughters to the public from whom they received generous support, emotionally and financially, this past year.

In an update to the Amish church community on their daughter who was six years old when she was seriously injured in the October 2 shooting, the parents of Rosanna King recently wrote,

"Rosanna was initially transported to Lancaster General Hospital via ambulance with a very severe head injury. From there, approximately an hour later, she was flown to Hershey Medical Center. We first saw her there at 8:00 PM. The doctor did not give us any hopes at all for survival, so at 8:30 they took the breathing machine off, thinking she would soon pass. A couple times that night and the next couple days we thought we were losing her. By Friday she was a little more stable.

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"October 18th ... we brought her home. At that time she could not make any sound at all but she had smiled a couple times. From that point on we saw a very slow but steady improvement. The hardest part has been to see her suffer. ... As of today she smiles a lot, big smiles, and ... recognizes family members and a few others and often responds to eye contact with a big smile. Her vision and hearing seem good and she follows us with her eyes. She will randomly move her arms and legs and also occasionally on command.

"We want to thank everybody for the prayers and support, be it a card in the mail, visitors, money sent to the funds, or someone who lent a listening ear when we just needed to talk, and for giving us the privacy we needed to give our full attention to Rosanna and our family. May God bless you richly for the care and support you have shown us."

At the present time Rosanna is confined to a reclining wheelchair, is not able to talk and is totally dependent on her family members for personal care, mobility and feeding by tube.

Another family, whose oldest daughter died instantly at the scene, stated in a recent update to the Amish church community, "'God has given. God has taken. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' That verse from Job has given us a lot to think about the last ten months since the terrible happening at West Nickel Mines School." They also wrote,

"Our second daughter Sarah Ann had severe head injuries. She was flown from the scene by medical helicopter to Reading Hospital then transferred to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia that afternoon for brain surgery. (After surgery they) put her on life support which is how we found her at 9:30 Monday evening. The doctor told us that her strong heart and strong lungs were a big plus.

"Thursday forenoon they took life support off because she no longer needed it. On October 19th they moved her to their rehab floor and started therapy. At four weeks she started talking and soon was walking with assistance. There were a lot of trying times in the first weeks of rehab but as she got better there were a lot of fun times.

"Sarah Ann came home December 22nd and started school on the 27th. She caught up to her class by the time the term ended. Emotionally she recovered enough to talk with the police and medics about the happening and how she was treated at the scene. Physically, the only visible effects are scars and her hair is still short from being shaved. She doesn't have full vision to the left side although it has greatly improved and is not noticeable to others. Her brain surgeon and therapists all said it's a true miracle that she recovered as fully as she did, which we thank God for. We also know that healing is not always as complete as we would wish for everyone, but we do know that God is with us in all things."

In early September 12-year-old Barbie Fisher had reconstructive nerve surgery to restore more complete usage of her severely injured shoulder and arm.

The parents of one of the injured girls recently said, "We want everyone to know that we are very thankful for the wonderful help of the state police and emergency personnel on the day of the happening, and for their visits and support afterwards." All of the families have repeatedly expressed their gratitude for those services and their concern for the trauma the first responders experienced as they assisted the victims.

The Bart Township Fire Company provided the leadership and facilities to respond to this unprecedented event in their community. They received generous support from neighboring fire companies, emergency services and the police, immediately and for months afterwards. People from the community, Amish and non-Amish together, volunteered time and services in countless ways. The Nickel Mines Accountability Committee still holds its meetings at the fire hall. The activities concentrated at the Bart Township Fire Company those first weeks after the tragedy are etched in the minds of observers as a symbol of community at its best. Through shared suffering and pain, in shoulder-to-shoulder labors of love, in mutual respect despite differences, the people of Nickel Mines are "bearing each other's burdens" as they seek solace and healing in their terrible loss.

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