

TESTIMONY OF ROBERT PARKER

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
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My name is Robbie Parker. I am the father of Emilie Parker, one of twenty students tragically murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012.

For the last six years, I have worked very hard to process the myriad emotions that have occupied my heart, mind, and soul from the events of that day. To try to comprehend how I could give my daughter a hug and a kiss before leaving for work not knowing that would be the last time I would ever feel her embrace and hear her voice.

Emilie has two younger sisters who were only four and three years old when she was killed. My wife and I have labored diligently to support them as best as we can. For those of you who have not had to explain a loss as sudden and as tragic and brutal as ours to your small and innocent children: let me leave you with no doubt it is an excruciating, long, and arduous experience that will continue for the rest of our lives.

If we had simply lost our daughter due to a disease, or a tragic accident, that painful process would perhaps have looked similar in some ways. I would still have had the experience of her being there in one moment and gone the next. Her sisters would still have to learn how to cope with the loss of a beloved sister. My wife and I would still work just as meticulously to help support them on their journey, as well as learning how to grieve as individuals, as a couple, and as a family, along with every other unforeseeable hardship that accompanies the dismal abyss of grief.

However, our story is not that—simple. Instead of simply being left to grieve in our own home, we were exposed to even more sinister people and motives. Within 48 hours of my daughters' murder, hoaxers and conspiracy theorists began spewing lies and threats about my family and me on sites like YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. A memorial page set up on Facebook by dear family friends became inundated with such vile videos and comments that we eventually were forced to shut the page down for an extended period of time.

I began to receive messages, emails, letters to my home and phone calls at my work. In short, these communications told me that I was a “liar,” that “justice was coming,” that “I was going to burn in hell,” and “to watch my back at all times.” They claimed that Emilie was still alive or that she never existed, all while accusing me of being a willing accomplice and conspiring with the government to stage or fake this tragedy. These people were fueled to act in this way from the information they were consuming on the internet, mainly from content found on social media platforms. Some people even created fake profiles with the name and pictures of the shooter and sent me friend requests posing as the shooter himself.

I have accepted the fact that I will never know what motivated that individual to enter Sandy Hook Elementary School that day. It takes a certain type of person to walk into a school and do

what that man did to those teachers and children. However, it takes a very different kind of person to witness that event, then regurgitate demonstrably and undeniably false information about that event while simultaneously attacking victims' families for profit. I understand that motivation—and I cannot accept it.

We reached out to places like YouTube and Facebook, pleading for help and asking that this content be removed from their sites. We either received programmed responses or cold silence.

Eventually, we had FBI agents in our home to discuss some of the more credible threats lobbed at me as well as at my wife and children. We have had to consult security experts to help us navigate certain threats and how to respond properly.

Ironically, we found that if a post or video displayed pictures of us, YouTube and Facebook would swiftly remove that content for being protected by copyright. However, they systematically failed to protect us from harassment and threats and allowed their sites to be used as a genesis and breeding ground for fraudulent and hateful information to be spread, collected and launched at my family.

Recently, many of these companies have changed course and begun to remove some of this content. I don't believe this was done because of the years of requests by not just Sandy Hook families, but many other victims of mass tragedies. Instead, they did so because it became more generally known that such abuse was happening and people were shocked and horrified. Only when it became clear to the general public that social media companies' inactivity and failure to protect these families was a result of complacency were they then forced to act. In other words, only when they realized it would tarnish their brand and affect them financially did they finally respond appropriately.

I hate to think how much time has been stolen from us because of this issue. Instead of grieving, my family was forced to use what precious energy we had to combat these attacks, alone, to protect Emilie's memory—and ourselves—instead of focusing on our healing. This ordeal has taught me that time with my family is a precious and limited gift.

In this day and age, when our opinions and thoughts can so easily be shared to the world, we all have a responsibility to ensure our freedom of speech is not trampled upon. Deciding what content is allowed or prohibited on these platforms is paramount in the continuation of our rights to expression. Allowing hateful, false information to proliferate on the internet doesn't just corrupt our national dialogue—it has real consequences for real people. I believe that social media companies have a duty to moderate content, not to limit, but rather to protect the First Amendment in the way in which it was intended.