

AFTER APALACHEE

A loud thud sounds at Apalachee High School sophomore Traveler Whaley's front door.

He looks up from his seat on his couch. Nobody is home — neither his dad, a police officer in Atlanta, nor his mom, a teacher at Barrow County's Haymon-Morris Middle School, are expected back for hours. Nervously, Whaley twists the lock, turns the doorknob and opens the door.

A hazy figure stands in the doorway. In his hand, he grips a steel-gray gun. With a start, Whaley wakes up.

English department co-chair Meghan McNeeley's mind lurches back in time, racing past the 30 students in her freshman literature class to her formative years.

She remembers being introduced to gun violence while she was in college when stray bullets struck her dad's house.

She remembers when three teenage boys shot 13 bullets into her mother's house — one inches from her mother's head — in 2001, her first year teaching.

She remembers chasing down the intruder who walked into the Clarke Middle School girls bathroom with a knife and duct tape in 2007.

Angrily, McNeeley returns to the present.

Dr. Javier Soler plays an audio recording for his second-period Advanced Placement Spanish Language and Culture class on Oct.

3. The author Isabel Allende is discussing her novel "La casa de los espíritus" (The House of Spirits), when she is cut off by the disembodied voice from the ceiling.

"Ensure all students are in a classroom and lock the doors. Normal classroom activities may still proceed."

Without looking up from her laptop screen, a girl toward the back of the classroom asks, "If there's a shooting, can we run?"

Nobody laughs.

This is life, post-Apalachee.

Featured: LOOKING INTO THE PAST: Apalachee High School sophomore Traveler Whaley stands in front of a memorial for the victims of the Apalachee school shooting. Whaley suffered through the shooting on Sept. 4. "A lot of (my classmates) were really, really scared to the point of shaking. I could feel one person shaking through two people," Whaley said. Photo by Wyatt Meyer



Twenty-five miles away from Clarke Central High School, at 10:20 a.m. on Sept. 4, a student, armed with an AR-15 style rifle, opened fire at Apalachee High School.

In doing so, the shooter forever impacted the mental health of a generation of students. The shooting began in a hallway called J Hall. The alleged shooter, Apalachee freshman Colt Gray, fired his first shots at the far end of J Hall, right outside Whaley's classroom.

"They say it stopped in like 20 seconds, but I don't know. Just in the moment, it felt like 20 minutes."

-- TRAVELER WHALEY,
Apalachee High School sophomore

"We heard the first shots and got in the corner, and then we just sat being quiet and fearful for a little bit," Whaley said. "They say it stopped in like 20 seconds, but I don't know. Just in the moment, it felt like 20 minutes."

After the shooter surrendered to School Resource Officers, students and staff were evacuated to the Apalachee football field until parents were able to pick them up. On the way to the field, Whaley remembers he and his classmates walked through the fallout of the shooting — red-stained floors, injured students, and a fine white powder coating it all.

"Everyone thought that it was gunpowder, but it turns out that from the caliber of the bullet that he was shooting, it knocked dust off the ceiling and it fell over the floor," Whaley said. "It looked like there was flour just spread out."

News broke while CCHS students and teachers were in Advisement, with more details emerging throughout the day.

"I was in biology class, and (my classmates are) like, 'Y'all, there was a shooting at Apalachee.' I was like, 'What? That doesn't sound real,'" CCHS senior Carla Tipiani-Tumen said. "I was kind of confused at the moment, and then when I kept reading more news about it, it got me really worried to even go back to school the next day."

The full impact of the shooting came into focus in

the following days. Four people — freshmen Christian Angulo and Mason Schermerhorn; teachers Ricky Aspinwall and Cristina Irimie — were killed, while nine others were injured.

The school shooting became Georgia's deadliest on record, according to the National Gun Violence Archive.

"When I first heard the news, I was numb, but then the numbness turned into frustration," CCHS Principal Dr. Swade Huff said. "I feel like we revisit these tragedies every so often and we have adults or leaders in this country who play on the four (people) who lost their lives."

In the aftermath, vigils were held for the deceased students and teachers. Barrow County schools shut down for the rest of the week — Apalachee would remain closed for another two weeks. When students did return to school, a wall was erected across the front of J-Hall, as if the hallway had never existed.

Simultaneously, though, a subtler change has come to the fore in the weeks following the shooting: the mental health of school communities.

"The whole time, my head is just thinking about the people that lost their lives, the families that will no longer see them again."

-- SHAMIR STOKES,
Apalachee High School senior

"The mental health issues, in my opinion, have risen, or they have come to the surface since Apalachee. Maybe they were always there, but since then, I think they're at the surface," CCHS Associate Principal of Operations Tamika Henson said.

Henson's sentiment — echoed by lawmakers from Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock of Georgia to Republican Sen. JD Vance of Ohio — has held true for students like Apalachee senior Shamir Stokes.

"I replayed the whole incident a lot, and the whole time my head is just thinking about the people that lost their lives, the families that will no longer see them again," Stokes said. "(I'm) thinking about all of that, and just thinking that this could have been me."

Caron Hope, Barrow County's Project AWARE Program Manager, has observed a similar story.



Above: COMRADES IN ARMS: Seniors on the Apalachee High School varsity football team link arms prior to the team's game against Clarke Central High School in Billy Henderson Stadium on Sept. 28. The game was Apalachee's first since defensive coordinator Ricky Aspinwall was killed in the school shooting on Sept. 4. "Everything now is for Coach Aspinwall and the other victims. That's how we want to honor them: by getting out on the field and playing football," Apalachee head varsity football coach Mike Hancock said. Photo by Wyatt Meyer

Project AWARE, grant-funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency to foster sustainable mental health services in Georgia, provides mental health resources and support to counties that apply. At Apalachee, where there are no mental health counselors specifically employed, Project AWARE is the main line of defense for students' mental health.

On the Thursday and Friday after the shooting, volunteer counselors and therapists from the

focused on students' fight-or-flight response.

"A lot of times it's just listening," Hope said. "If it's anxiety-related, (we have been) offering suggestions for (what to do) if you start feeling this way, just trying to be as solution-focused as we can while absolutely still wanting to listen."

When Apalachee re-opened on Sept. 24, counseling services shifted location again. Counselors set up in the school media center, with teachers given the directive

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-- CARON HOPE,

Barrow County Project AWARE Program Manager

surrounding schools held crisis counseling for affected families at the BCSS Board Office. In the subsequent two weeks when Apalachee remained closed, mental health services shifted to the Winder Public Library, where volunteers from around the state continued to provide counseling alongside Hope and other Project AWARE personnel.

According to Hope, who coordinated the counseling efforts, the conversations in the immediate aftermath

to allow any student seeking a conversation to go to the media center. Hope says students re-entering the school environment experienced a new set of triggers.

"The students who are seeking support in the media center will say that the noises are overwhelming, whether it's a door slam or keys jingling. Something happens that their senses pick up that reminds them of that day, September 4," Hope said. "Their body kind of goes into fight-or-flight mode, like it did that day. Their



Above: WATCHING ON: Attendees at the varsity football game between Apalachee High School and Clarke Central High School in Billy Henderson Stadium on Sept. 28 react to emotional moments throughout the game. The Wildcats' 48-21 loss to the Gladiators was overshadowed by the return to normalcy for Apalachee student-athletes. "I think (the game) is a good way to step back into things and get to the norm for our school. Everybody (can) come back together and feel at home again," Apalachee High School cheerleader Danaysha Butler said. Photos by Wyatt Meyer

nervous system just can't cope with it."

The effects have permeated beyond Barrow County.

CCHS senior Naani Simmons was a former Apalachee student until she transferred to CCHS at the start of the 2024-25 school year. When she heard the news, which impacted some of her closest friends, she says her body shut down.

"I kept thinking about the shooting and it was very hard for me to sleep. I couldn't sleep without shaking," Simmons said. "I would try to eat, but it felt like I had to throw up every time I ate."

CCHS Mental Health Counselor Dr. Meg Huntington says many CCHS students and staff have reacted similarly, if not identically, to Simmons. In the first month after the shooting, roughly 20 students and teachers spoke to Huntington about the encounter.

In Huntington's 20 years as a counselor, it's the most people she's ever seen related to a single event.

"(The shooting has) had a huge ripple effect. It's never (been) this close, not down the road from where I worked," Huntington said. "(The fears) are connected. They're in our community."

"The kids that come to me don't feel safe."

-- DR. MEG HUNTINGTON,
CCHS Mental Health Counselor

Similar to Apalachee, the students came in waves. First came students with direct connections to Apalachee: those who transferred from Apalachee or who had friends and family at the school spoke about their worry for loved ones.

Next were the students for whom the violence uncovered trauma from their personal lives — multiple students who had experienced gun violence were triggered by the incident.

The last wave — the one still ongoing — is the students and teachers concerned for their future: those wondering what to do in an active shooter situation, those triggered by lockdown drills, even those accused of looking like school shooters themselves.

"(One student) kept thinking, 'What if it's not (a drill)? What if they're just telling us it's a drill, but actually there's a shooter?'" Huntington said. "The kids that come to me don't feel safe."

Outside of the CCHS Counseling Suite, teachers like McNeeley are fighting the broader effects of the trauma in their classrooms. The day following the shooting, a brother and sister came into McNeeley's class with "something flat in their faces."

"(The brother) had two panic attacks just from the idea of coming to school," McNeeley said. "I gave the little brother a hug, and he just squeezed. He didn't let go. When I let go, he just squeezed."

CCHS Multi-Classroom Leader Lawanna Knight primarily works with ninth grade students. Among those students, she's seen a variety of reactions.



Above: WIDE-EYED: Apalachee High School sophomore Traveler Whaley (left) and Clarke Central High School English department co-chair Meghan McNeeley (right) pose for portraits. Photos by Wyatt Meyer

“(Some kids) use laughter and just kind of push it aside. It was like, ‘Oh, it’s just another school shooting.’ I think trauma has become just so normalized that some students can’t even deal with it.” Knight said. “I kind of mourn a loss of innocence. You can’t even navigate through high school without experiencing (a mass shooting).”

According to Massachusetts’ Salem State University Assistant Professor Christopher Collins, a licensed

Collins has intimate experience with the impacts of gun violence. At 19, his father died by firearm-related suicide, and later, while he was pursuing his Ph.D at Florida State University, a fellow FSU student and nursing faculty member were killed in a shooting at a yoga studio miles from his house.

Those experiences were the exigence for Collins’s research into the intersection between gun violence and mental health — a relatively young field of science

that has struggled to make tangible impacts on the numbers of mass shootings today.

“Part of the reason that this discussion continues to be unresolved is that there isn’t one root cause — there’s a nexus of factors that come into play,” Collins said. “We’re, frankly, just so bad at predicting this type of behavior because it’s logistically rare, there’s not enough data. When every other mass shooting has a different

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Salem State University Assistant Professor

clinician who researches firearm violence prevention, responses such as those seen in the Barrow and Athens-Clarke County communities are typical.

“It’s very easy for us to see ourselves in other people, especially when it comes to a crisis,” Collins said. “If I’m living a couple of miles or a couple of counties over from people who I know, who we play in team sports, who I’m friends with, who have been victimized, of course I’m going to see myself in that population of people.”

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According to Collins, any improvement in mental health outcomes for young people begins with strong mental health infrastructure.

Yet, community mental health isn’t a high-paying job — insurance company CM&F Group reports that most U.S. mental health professionals make between \$40,000



Above: THE FRONT LINES: Clarke Central High School Multi-Classroom Leader Lawanna Knight (left) and CCHS senior Naani Simmons pose for portraits. Photos by Wyatt Meyer

and \$50,000 yearly. According to the Fiscal Year 2025 CCSD Certified Teacher Salary Schedule, entry-level counselors in the CCSD receive just more than that amount at \$56,000.

Despite the meager pay, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that mental health-related occupations are growing by 12%, making them one of the fastest growing jobs in the country.

"We need more people who are passionate about doing that work, people growing up and saying, 'Oh, I want to do this work right,'" Collins said. "(We need) younger people continuing to be loud voices and saying, 'We have an unmet need that mental health providers have to help to fill.' That's really the only way of moving the needle."

In the CCSD, discussions regarding the fallout of the Apalachee shooting have concentrated on school safety, with Assistant Superintendent of Operations Dr. Garrick Askew presenting a safety update at the Sept. 12 Board of Education meeting.

However, on the mental health front, Executive Director of Student and Family Support Tessa Barbazon says most of the support has been concentrated at the school level.

"We haven't really had any district-driven, concentrated initiatives or efforts around, 'Hey, we want everyone to do A, B, C and D. Transparently

speaking, there's not been that specific type of response," Barbazon said.

Compared to surrounding counties, the CCSD offers extensive mental health resources. In addition to two Mental Wellness Specialists, the CCSD employs 12 social workers, whereas the similarly-sized BCSS has six social workers stated as employed on its website. Nearby Oconee County School District, which boasts a #1 rating in Georgia from popular school ranking

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site Niche.com, employs even fewer – only two social workers are listed on its website.

At the school level, after consultation with the CCSD BOE, CCSD middle and high schools have dedicated mental health counselors employed to support students. However, BOE member Dr. Lakeisha Gantt, a professional psychologist, personally believes that state and BOE resources ought to be more devoted to mental health.

"Our local delegates have to be open to exploring resources for children," Gantt said. "It's one thing to protect – that's important – but it's another thing to help children thrive and to build their confidence and wellness."

On a school level, Knight believes there are small areas of improvement in CCHS' mental health infrastructure, particularly regarding trauma-informed training courses for teachers. These courses, which some CCHS teachers have taken, focus on strategies teachers can use to support students in the classroom.

"We can only filter a certain amount of kids to counseling, to mental health, even to a social worker," Knight said. "It would be great if teachers had a tool box of some trauma-informed strategies that they could use to assist kids, at least get them to the right place."

"That's the part that I struggle with: that no matter what we do, we can't be prepared."

-- MEGHAN MCNEELEY,
CCHS English department co-chair

Barbazon says CCSD schools are unlikely to offer long-term clinical support. Instead, her goal is to have schools provide some structured, short-term clinical support as a bridge to more sustainable care from outside the district.

"There will always be aspects of higher-level mental health care needs and long-term needs that have to get addressed in a more clinical setting," Barbazon said. "There's just a lot of complex layers, because again, mental health is health. You have to (deal with) that in the same way you would with any other medical care service."

The centralized Project AWARE system in Barrow County is fundamentally different to the school-based one in the CCSD, but the same challenges remain. Hope oversees mental health services for the BCSS, with a mental health clinician assigned to the Apalachee and Winder-Barrow High School clusters. According to Hope, prior to the shooting, school counselors would handle some student support work on-site but rely on Project AWARE for higher-level care outside of the traditional school setting.

"The system is overwhelmed right now and it's taxed right now, but it's there," Hope said. "Could it be better? Have we learned a lot from this incident about mental health going forward? Sure. We'll make some adjustments and changes around that. But, we were, and are, fortunate that we had a lot of resources and systems in place already."

For Marcey Florey, the parent of an Apalachee sophomore who was a classroom away from where the

shooting occurred, the district's mental health response has helped students.

"(The district is doing) all kinds of things for the students, not that it's going to make it better, but just to let them know, 'Hey, we know that this traumatic event happened in your life, and it's something that will be with you the rest of your life, but we want you to know we're here,'" Florey said.

As a member of the CCHS school community, McNeeley is compartmentalizing. After experiencing mood swings throughout September, she took two days off of school at the end of the month – her first "true" mental health days off in almost 25 years of teaching.

She says the time allowed her to turn the corner, but coming back to school, she still doesn't have answers for how to approach mental health.

"I think about the safety of the students primarily, and that hasn't ever changed. I know what I'm supposed to do, but it sounds like the teachers (at Apalachee) did what they were supposed to do, and that's the part that I struggle with: that no matter what we do, we can't be prepared," McNeeley said.

As Knight looks toward next semester and years beyond, she hopes students confront the struggles they face. To her, society has made recent progress in destigmatizing mental health.

"It's so weird to me because we can break a bone and get healed...but when something's broken in your heart, something's broken in your mind, it's not okay to talk about."

-- LAWANNA KNIGHT,
CCHS Multi-Classroom Leader

But equally, she believes there's a long way to go.

"It's so weird to me, because we can break a bone and we get healed, we go to (physical therapy) for months and months, but when something's broken in your heart, something's broken in your head, it's not okay to talk about," Knight said.

Tipiani-Tumen didn't foresee such a tragic event happening in her community, but her sense of safety was one of the reasons she decided to become a full-time Athens Community Career Academy student at the start of the school year.

Fear already high, the shooting has taken Tipiani-Tumen's to an all new level.

"It makes me (be) more on fight or flight mode now. I just feel way more anxious about it because it happened out of nowhere," Tipiani-Tumen said. "I'm scared that in a public place, (a shooting) could happen anywhere."

From the minds of Knight, McNeeley and Tipiani-Tumen to those of all the affected students and teachers in Athens, Barrow County and beyond, mental health struggles aren't disappearing. Though the country's so-called "mental health crisis" is well-documented by politicians and pundits alike, the truth may be even graver.

"A crisis, by definition, is time-limited. I think that this is probably more chronic than a crisis," Collins said. "When we've been calling (it) a mental health crisis for six months, a year, an entire presidency, it's no longer a crisis. It's a chronic issue.

It is systemic." **O**

This story is the first in a three-part series covering the aftermath of the Apalachee High School shooting. Parts two and three will appear in Issues III and IV of the ODYSSEY Newsmagazine.

Featured: DESENSITIZED TO DANGER: Students walk in front of the Clarke Central High School Ceremonial Entrance on Nov. 19. CCHS Multi-Classroom Leader Lawanna Knight has observed the long-running consequences of the school shooting on students' academic experience. "Some kids are just now able to perform in school now and we're still getting transfers from Apalachee," Knight said. "Every time somebody comes in and says, 'I'm from Apalachee,' it opens up that wound." Photo by Wyatt Meyer

