

To make the loss of these lives matter.

My wife and I -- my wife and I -- Camila -- we spent most of last week on the ground with the families in Uvalde, Texas, and we shared stories, tears, and memories.

The common thread, independent of the anger and the confusion and sadness, it was the same: How can these families continue to honor these deaths by keeping the dreams of these children and teachers alive?

Again, how can the loss of these lives matter?

So while we honor and acknowledge the victims, we need to recognize that this time it seems that something is different. There is a sense that perhaps there is a viable path forward. Responsible parties in this debate seem to at least be committed to sitting down and having a real conversation about a new and improved path forward -- a path that can bring us closer together and make us safer as a country, a path that can actually get something done this time.

Camila and I came here to share my stories from my hometown of Uvalde. I came here to take meetings with elected officials on both sides of the aisle. We came here to speak to them, to speak with them, and to urge them to speak with each other -- to remind and inspire them that the American people will continue to drive forward the mission of keeping our children safe, because it's more than our right to do so, it's our responsibility to do so.

I'm here today in the hopes of applying what energy, reason, and passion that I have into trying to turn this moment into a reality. Because as I said, this moment is different. We are in a window of opportunity right now that we have not been in before, a window where it seems like real change -- real change can happen.

Uvalde, Texas, is where I was born. It's where my mom taught kindergarten less than a mile from Robb Elementary. Uvalde is where I learned to master a Daisy BB gun. I took that -- that took two years before I graduated to a 410 shotgun. Uvalde is where I was taught to revere the power and the capability of the tool that we call a gun. Uvalde is where I learned responsible gun ownership.

And Uvalde called me on May 24th, when I learned the news of this devastating tragedy. I had been out of cellular range working in the studio all day when I emerged and messages about a mass shooting in the town I was born in began flooding my inbox.

In a bit of shock, I drove home, hugged my children a bit tighter and longer than the night before, and then the reality of what had happened that day in the town I was born in set in.

So the next morning, Camila, myself, and the kids, we loaded up the truck and drove to Uvalde. And when we arrived a few hours later, I got to tell you, even from the inside of our vehicle, you could feel the shock in the town. You could feel the pain, the denial, the disillusion, anger, blame, sadness, loss of lives, dreams halted.

We saw ministries. We saw first responders, counselors, cooks, families trying to grieve without it being on the frontpage news.

We met with the local funeral director and countless morticians who -- who hadn't slept since the massacre the day before because they'd been working 24/7 trying to handle so many bodies at once -- so many little, innocent bodies who had their entire lives still yet to live.

And that is there that we met two of the grieving parents, Ryan and Jessica Ramirez. Their 10-year-old daughter, Alithia -- she was one of the 19 children that were killed the day before.

Now, Alithia -- her dream was to go to art school in Paris and one day share her art with the world. Ryan and Jessica were eager to share Alithia's art with us, and said if we could share it, then somehow maybe that would make Alithia smile in heaven. They told us that showing someone else Alithia's art would in some way keep her alive.

Now, this particular drawing is a -- is a self-portrait of Alithia drawing, with her friend in heaven looking down on her drawing the very same picture. Her mother said, of this drawing -- she said, "You know, we never really talked to her about heaven before, but somehow she knew."

Alithia was 10 years old.

Her father, Ryan -- this man was steady. He was uncommonly together and calm. When a frazzled friend of his came up and said, "How are you so calm? I'd be going crazy," Ryan told him -- he said, "No, you wouldn't. No, you wouldn't. You'd be strong for your wife and kids, because if they see you go crazy, that will not help them."

Just a week prior, Ryan got a full-time line job stringing powerlines from pole to pole. And every day since landing that well-paying, full-time job, he reminded his daughter, Alithia -- he said, "Girl, Daddy going to spoil you now." Told her every single night. He said, "Daddy is going to take you to SeaWorld one day.

But he didn't get to -- he didn't get to spoil his daughter, Alithia. She did not get to go to SeaWorld.

We also met Ana and Dani -- Danilo, the mom and the stepdad of nine-year-old Maite Rodriguez. And Maite wanted to be a marine biologist. She was already in contact with Corpus Christi University of A&M for her future college enrollment. Nine years old.

Maite cared for the environment so strongly that when the city asked her mother if they could release some balloons into the sky in her memory, her mom said, "Oh no, Maite wouldn't want to litter."

Maite wore green high-top Converse with a heart she had hand-drawn on the right toe because they represented her love of nature.

Camila has got these shoes. Can you show these shoes, please?

Wore these every day. Green Converse with a heart on the right toe. These are the same green Converse on her feet that turned out to be the only clear evidence that could identify her after the shooting. How about that?

Maite wrote a letter. Her mom said if Maite's letter could help someone accomplish her dream, that then her death would have an impact, and it would mean her dying had a point and wasn't pointless -- that it would make the loss of her life matter.

The letter reads: "Marine biologist. I want to pass school to get to my dream college. My dream college is in Corpus Christi, by the ocean. I need to live next to the ocean because I want to be a marine biologist. Marine biologists study animals and the water. Most of the time, I will be in a lab. Sometimes, I will be on TV."

Then there was Ellie Garcia, a 10-year-old, and her parents, Steven and Jennifer.

Ellie loved to dance, and she loved church. She even knew how to drive tractors and was already working with her dad and her uncle mowing yards.

"Ellie was always giving of her gifts, her time, even half-eaten food on her plate," they said. They said, "Around the house, we'd call her the 'great re-gifter.'" Smiling through tears, her family told us how Ellie loved to embrace. Said she was the biggest hugger in the family.

Now, Ellie was born Catholic, but had been going to Baptist church with her uncle for the last couple of years. Her mom and dad were proud of her because, they said, "She was learning to love God, no matter where."

The week prior to her passing, she had been preparing to read a verse from the Bible for the next Wednesday night's church service. The verse was from Deuteronomy 6:5. "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

That's who Ellie was becoming. But she never got to read it. Service is on a Wednesday night.

Then there was the fairytale love story of a teacher named Irma and her husband, Joe. What a great family this was. This was an amazing family.

Camila and I, we -- we sat with about 20 of their family members in the living room, along with their four kids. They were -- the kids were 23, 19, 15, and 13. They -- they shared all these stories about Irma and Joe -- served the community and would host all these parties, and how Irma and Joe were planning on getting a food truck together when they soon retired.

They were humble, hardworking people. Irma was a teacher, who, her family said, "went above and beyond, and just couldn't say no to any kind of teaching." Joe had been commuting to and from work 70 miles away in Del Rio for years.

Together, they were the glue of the family. Both worked overtime to support their four kids. Irma even worked every summer when school was out. The money she had made two summers ago paid to -- paid to paint the front of the house. The money she made last summer paid to paint the sides of the house. This summer's work was going to pay to paint the back of the house.

Because Irma was one of the teachers who was gunned down in the classroom, Joe, her husband, literally died of heartache the very next day when he had a heart attack.

They never got to paint the back of the house, they never got to retire, and they never got to get that food truck together.

We also met a cosmetologist. All right? She was well versed in mortuary makeup. That's the task of making the victims appear as peaceful and natural as possible for their open-casket viewings.

These bodies were very different. They needed much more than makeup to be presentable. They needed extensive restoration. Why? Due to the exceptionally large exit wounds of an AR-15 rifle. Most of the bodies so mutilated that only DNA tests or green Converse could identify them. Many children were left not only dead, but hollow.

So yes, counselors are going to be needed in Uvalde for a long time. Counselors are needed in all these places where these mass shooters have been for a long time.

I was told by many that it takes a good year before people even understand what to do next. And even then, when they become se- -- secure enough to take the first step forward, a lifetime is not going to heal those wounds.

Again, you know what every one of these parents wanted, what they asked us for? What every parent separately expressed in their own way to Camila and me? That they want their children's dreams to live on. That they want their children's dreams to continue to accomplish something after they are gone. They want to make their loss of life matter.

Look, we heard from -- we heard from so many people, all right? Families of the deceased -- mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. Texas Rangers, hunters, Border Patrol, and responsible gun owners who won't give up their Second Amendment right to bear arms. And you know what they all said? "We want secure and safe schools, and we want gun laws that won't make it so easy for the bad guys to get these damn guns."

So, we know what's on the table. We need to invest in mental healthcare. We need safer schools. We need to restrain sensationalized media coverage. We need to restore our family values. We need to restore our American values. And we need responsible gun ownership -- responsible gun ownership.

We need background checks. We need to raise the minimum age to purchase an AR-15 rifle to 21. We need a waiting period for those rifles. We need red-flag laws and consequences for those who abuse them.

These are reasonable, practical, tactical regulations to our nation, states, communities, schools, and homes.

Responsible gun owners are fed up with the Second Amendment being abused and hijacked by some deranged individuals.

These regulations are not a step back; they're a step forward for a civil society and -- and the Second Amendment.

Look, is this a cure-all? Hell no.

But people are hurting -- families are, parents are. And look, as -- as divided as our country is, this gun responsibility issue is one that we agree on more than we don't. It really is. But this should be a nonpartisan issue. This should not be a partisan issue.

There is not a Democratic or Republican value in one single act of these shooters. It's not.

But people in power have failed to act. So we're asking you and I'm asking you, will you please ask yourselves: Can both sides rise above? Can both sides see beyond the political problem at hand and admit that we have a life preservation problem on our hands?

Because we got a chance right now to reach for and to grasp a higher ground above our political affiliations, a chance to make a choice that does more than protect your party, a chance to make a choice that protects our country now and for the next generation.

We got to take a sober, humble, and honest look in the mirror and re- -- rebrand ourselves based on what we truly value. What we truly value.

We got to get some real courage and honor our immortal obligations instead of our party affiliations.

Enough with the counterpunching. Enough of the invalidation of the other side. Let's come to the common table that represents the American people. Find a mil- -- middle ground, the place where most of us Americans live anyway, especially on this issue.

Because I promise you, America -- you and me, who -- we are not as divided as we're being told we are. No.

How about we get inspired? Give ourselves just cause to revere our future again. Maybe set an example for our children, give us reason to tell them, "Hey, listen and watch these men and women. These are great American leaders right here. Hope you grow up to be like them."

And let's admit it: We can't truly be leaders if we're only living for reelection.

Let's be knowledgeable and wise, and act on what we truly believe.

Again, we got to look in the mirror, lead with humility, and acknowledge the values that are inherent to but also above politics. We've got to make choices, make stands, embrace new ideas, and preserve the traditions that can create true -- true progress for the next generation.

With real leadership, let's start giving us -- all of us, with real leadership -- let's start giving all of us good reason to believe that the American Dream is not an illusion.

So where do we start? We start by making the right choices on the issue that is in front of us today.

We start by making laws that save innocent lives and don't infringe on our Second Amendment rights. We start right now by voting to pass policies that can keep us from having as many Columbines, Sandy Hooks, Parklands, Las Vegases, Buffaloes, and Uvaldes from here on.

We start by giving Alithia the chance to be spoiled by her dad.

We start by giving Maite a chance to become a marine biologist.

We start by giving Ellie a chance to read her Bible verse at the Wednesday night service.

We start by giving Irma and Joe a chance to finish painting their house, maybe retire and get that food truck.

We start by giving Makenna, Layla, Maranda, Nevaeh, Jose, Xavier, Tess, Rojelio, Eliahna, Annabell, Jackie, Uziyah, Jayce, Jailah, Eva, Amerie, and Lexi -- we start by giving all of them our promise that their dreams are not going to be forgotten.

We start by making the loss of these lives matter.

Thank you. Thank you.