

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-parkland-fathers-quest-for-accountability-11547249451>

OPINION | THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

A Parkland Father's Quest for Accountability

'I blame the murderer for 50% of what happened,' Andrew Pollack says. 'There were so many people who didn't care, who didn't do their job.'

By Tunku Varadarajan

Jan. 11, 2019 6:30 p.m. ET

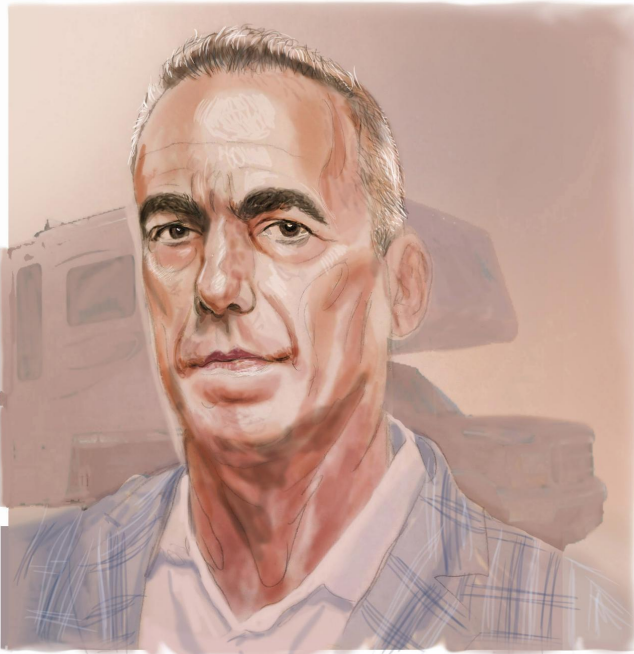
Lake Wales, Fla.

In a campground near Lake Kissimmee, Andrew Pollack and I sit in the shadow of a white RV, his spartan home. He broods by my side in cargo shorts and a T-shirt. He's just sold his large house in Coral Springs, Fla., because he feels "physically sick to be in Broward County," where his 18-year-old daughter was shot dead last Valentine's Day at Marjory Stoneman Douglas School in Parkland. He's lived in his RV for nearly three weeks with his wife and their Belgian Malinois puppy, who isn't yet at ease with life in a mobile home. A campfire burns skittishly in the lakeside wind, its blaze nothing compared with Mr. Pollack's burning rage.

A lean and rugged 52, he is a man of adamant words: He always says that his daughter, Meadow, was "murdered." He scolds me—then swiftly apologizes—when I once say she "died." I ask him about her name, and he tells me he and her mother (from whom Mr. Pollack is divorced) got it from "The Sopranos": "I thought it was a pretty name. All my kids have unique names. Huck is my oldest, from Huck Finn. My other son's called Hunter."

There is a lull for a moment, as Mr. Pollack struggles to compose himself. He tells me he cannot bear to utter the name of Nikolas Cruz, the former student at Meadow's school who is charged with killing 17 people—14 students and three adult staff members—in 11 minutes of unchecked carnage, making Parkland the worst high-school shooting in U.S. history. "I call him by his prison ID number," Mr. Pollack says. "It's 18-1958."

In the 11 months since Meadow was murdered, Mr. Pollack has been transformed from an ordinary suburban dad and rental-market realtor to a



vehement, in-your-face crusader for school safety. Days after the Parkland shooting, he met with President Trump at the White House. “We spoke for a while in the Oval Office,” Mr. Pollack says, “and that’s when I

ILLUSTRATION: GRANT ROBERTSON

recommended to him that he should put together a commission on school safety.” In Mr. Pollack’s account, “the president then points his finger at Hope Hicks”—then White House communications director—“and he says, ‘I like that. I want to do that.’” Mr. Pollack returned to the White House when the commission’s report was presented 10 months later, sitting at a table to the president’s right. He has co-written a book, “Why Meadow Died: The People and Policies That Created the Parkland Shooter and Endangered America’s Students,” to be published next month.

He doesn’t like to be called a “crusader” and says “I’m not a politician.” Yet Mr. Pollack is now a player in Florida’s politics. The day before we met at his RV, then-Gov. Rick Scott appointed him to the State Board of Education. He says he’ll use his position on the seven-member board to ensure “accountability,” a word he uses frequently. His objective, he says, is to hold to account “every individual, every institution, every policy” that led to his daughter’s death.

“I blame the murderer for 50% of what happened,” Mr. Pollack says. “I don’t blame him for the whole thing. Because there were just so many people who didn’t care, who didn’t do their job, that I blame them for the other 50%. And I need to expose them. That’s how I bounce back.” He pauses and corrects himself: “No, I don’t bounce back. I’ll never do that. I can’t even smile in photographs anymore, can’t show my teeth.” He thinks “day in, and day out” about accountability “for these people, because of whom I can’t walk my daughter down the aisle.”

Mr. Pollack believes that “political correctness killed Meadow.” A prominent villain in his narrative is Robert Runcie, who came to Broward from Chicago

in 2011 as the superintendent of the county's public schools. Mr. Runcie introduced a program called Promise—a feel-good acronym for Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Support and Education—under which students who commit crimes in public schools would no longer be reported to the police by administrators. Under Promise, students would be evaluated and dealt with exclusively within the schools and their associated reform programs. Even felonies as severe as drug dealing, sexual assault and bringing weapons to school could lawfully be kept from the police.

Mr. Runcie “saw that minority students were being referred to the police at higher rates than whites,” as Mr. Pollack tells it. “Rather than recognize that misbehavior can be the result of many complex problems outside school, or at home,” the superintendent concluded the disparity was because “teachers and schools were racist.” With no reporting, “now there’s no crime. The school’s data looks great. Problem solved.”

But a much worse problem was created: “No student has a criminal background as a result, so once you graduate from school and want to buy a gun, background checks are useless.”

Mr. Runcie and his supporters called their policy “discipline reform.” Violent students had to attend “healing circles,” among other sorts of in-house, nonjudicial remedies. The result, says Mr. Pollack—so agitated that he almost shouts—is that “mentally disturbed students, violent psychopaths like 18-1958, are right there in the classroom with normal students like my daughter, and with teachers who don’t know how to deal with them, since they can’t bring in the cops.” As Mr. Pollack writes in his forthcoming book: “His entire life, 18-1958 was practically screaming, ‘If you ignore me, I could become a mass murderer.’” Parkland, he says, “was the most avoidable mass shooting in American history. 18-1958 was never going to be a model citizen, but it truly took a village to raise him into a school shooter.”

Mr. Pollack describes the Broward County School District as “Ground Zero for a horrible approach to school safety that spread across America.” In January 2014, the Obama administration issued guidelines to the nation’s school boards, directing them to adopt Promise-like policies or risk a federal investigation and loss of funding. The report of the Trump school-safety commission, published Dec. 18, recommends abolishing such programs. “School boards won’t be hounded anymore to put these policies in place,” Mr. Pollack says. “But there’s nothing to stop a board from choosing to adopt Promise.” And Broward County has not abandoned it.

Mr. Pollack gives a detailed, impassioned account of the shooter’s behavior at school, every instance of which was reported to administrators and not to police. In middle school, the combustible adolescent was required to have adult supervision at all times. In high school, he vandalized a bathroom, causing more than \$1,000 of damage. He racially abused black students and

had fistfights with them. He carved swastikas on his desk. He hurled furniture across classrooms. He threw hard objects at other students, sometimes injuring them. He brought dead animals to school and often waved them before other students. He threatened to kill teachers and other students, and to shoot up the school. He wrote "KILL" in his notebooks and spoke frequently about guns. He brought knives to school and, on one occasion, a backpack full of bullets.

"After that," says Mr. Pollack, "the school banned him from bringing a backpack to school. But I ask you, if he's too dangerous to wear a backpack, why isn't he too dangerous to be in class with kids like my daughter?"

The political correctness that is anathema to Mr. Pollack appears to have infected Broward County law enforcement as well. Sheriff Scott Israel was on a drive to reduce juvenile arrests, and the department allowed Cruz to keep a clean record even though deputies were called to his home 45 times in his middle- and high-school years. On one of these occasions, "he'd punched his mother so hard in the mouth that she'd needed to get a new set of teeth," Mr. Pollack says. "Sheriff Israel judged his success by how many kids he kept out of jail. When officers never arrested 18-1958 despite 45 calls, they were following Israel's policy." On Friday the new governor, Ron DeSantis, suspended Mr. Israel from office. Mr. Pollack and two other Parkland parents stood alongside Mr. DeSantis as he made the announcement in Fort Lauderdale.

Cruz's mother, who died three months before the shooting, was encouraged by Henderson Behavioral Health, Broward's largest mental-health provider, to let her son "earn" a pellet gun for good behavior in 2014—which he proceeded to use to shoot at the neighbors' pets and children. Henderson refused repeatedly to institutionalize Cruz, even as his mother pleaded with them to do so. In the week of his 18th birthday, Mr. Pollack tells me, she called them desperately, but their response to her pleas was that Cruz should be engaged "in coping skills such as reading magazines, watching TV, fishing and spending time with pets," according to the health center's own records.

Mr. Pollack has sued Henderson for wrongful death—"for their negligent approach to this murderer, for failing to deal with this psychopath." In a statement last May, Henderson said it had no involvement with Cruz after 2016 and that the shooting "was not a tragedy that could have been lawfully prevented by Henderson."

Mr. Pollack has also sued Scott Peterson, the armed deputy who was on the school's premises the day of the massacre but chose to remain outside the building. Mr. Peterson has since resigned from the Broward County Sheriff's Office. But "he's got his pension," Mr. Pollack says, "\$100,000 a year. This man—this coward. He retreats behind a pillar for 45 minutes. If he'd just gone in to the second floor—the shooter had just walked across there—he could have had a clear shot." Mr. Pollack cites Federal Bureau of

Investigation statistics to tell me that “shooters either give up or kill themselves if confronted with a weapon. They go into a gun-free zone thinking no one’s going to shoot back at them.”

Even though other deputies arrived within minutes—and didn’t go into the school either—Mr. Pollack is focused on Mr. Peterson, whom he sees as an embodiment of the forces that failed his daughter. Mr. Peterson’s lawyers moved to dismiss the lawsuit, arguing that the deputy didn’t have a duty to enter the school building. To which, Mr. Pollack tells me, the judge replied: “This is your defense? You’re telling me that this deputy didn’t have the duty to go in and save those kids?” The judge allowed the suit to go forward.

Punishment is not Mr. Pollack’s only objective, he says. The lawsuits allow him to “subpoena people throughout the whole district, school administrators, other deputies, policemen from the department in Coral Springs that did the right thing and rushed the building.” That, he expects, will “expose the incompetence in Broward County that goes right up to the sheriff.”

Mr. Pollack’s cause is righteous, but also lonely. “I feel a lot of times that it’s just my battle,” he says. “A lot of the other parents aren’t as focused on exposing these people as I am. To me, I have to do it for my daughter. And I’m not going to rest until I get accountability in the courtroom.” Nothing, it is clear, can fill the aching void in his life. He tells me that he stopped praying after Meadow was murdered. “I can’t,” he says. “I just can’t. At night, I used to thank God for my life. It’s tough for me to do that now. How could I? How would I? I’ll never have Meadow back.”

Mr. Varadarajan is executive editor at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

Appeared in the January 12, 2019, print edition.

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.