

The teenagers behind March For Our Lives

The teenagers who initiated March For Our Lives are an inspiration to young people everywhere, with their peaceful, powerful fight for safer schools and communities. They have used their skills and knowledge as young people to create viable positive change, mobilizing millions of their peers, controlling the public narrative on the issues that matter to them, and making people in power listen. March For Our Lives has grown from a small group of friends with shared passions, ideals and ambitions for a better world, into a far-reaching mass movement.

The safest place in Florida

David Hogg, Emma Gonzalez, Jaclyn Corin and Matt Deitsch grew up in a country where school shooting drills are a regular part of life. Nevertheless, living in affluent Parkland, Florida's safest community, they thought it could never happen to them. But it did. On Wednesday February 14, 2018, a former student returned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and shot 17 people dead, including 14 children.

Personally affected by the tragedy, David, Emma, Jaclyn and Matt were determined to act. David, at the time a teen reporter for the local newspaper, made a video during the shooting, while he was hiding in a classroom with other students. *"If our souls would be left behind,"* he said, *"our voices would echo on."* Jaclyn was planning a lobby with at least 100 students in the state capitol when she and Matt were invited to a friend's house to make a plan of action. A few days later, Emma called on politicians and the government to step up to the plate. Her 'We call BS speech' will go down in history as one of the most powerful speeches ever given by a teenager: *"We are going to be the kids you read about in textbooks. Not because we're going to be another statistic about mass shooting in America, but because, just as David said, we are going to be the last mass shooting."*

Safe schools and communities for everyone

David, Emma, Jaclyn and Matt co-founded March For Our Lives together with their friends to demand peaceful solutions for safer schools and communities.

Too many young Americans live in fear of violence every day, and as Jaclyn says, *"For people who felt unsafe everywhere else, school is now an unsafe place as well."*

Between January 2009 and May 2018, there have been 288 school shootings in the US. That is 57 times more than the number of school shootings in Canada, Japan, Germany, Italy, France and the United Kingdom put together.

Exposure to violence, whether direct or indirect, harms students' academic performance and their physical and mental health. Grades go down and the likelihood of mental illness goes up. Feeling unsafe at school or on the way there can be harmful, leading students to miss classes or to protect themselves in ways that will actually increase the likelihood of violence.

We all March For Our Lives

In the weeks after the shooting, David, Emma, Jaclyn, Matt and their friends gave countless TV and newspaper interviews to keep the memory of their friends, classmates and teachers alive, and to demand action. In between, they would get together to organize their biggest action: the March For Our Lives in Washington, D.C.

Millions of people were inspired. Hundreds of thousands showed up at the march on Pennsylvania Avenue, and more than 800 sister marches emerged in all 50 US states and around the globe. Each one called for a peaceful solution to ensure safer schools and communities.

March For Our Lives could count on a broad base. They crowdfunded over 5 million dollars in no time. People from all walks of life showed their support. What started out as a global cry for a safer future turned into a well-defined youth-led movement. More than 20 teenagers strategized and organized at the center, while 1200 local chapters sprang up.

Create your own content

Born in the internet era, the March For Our Lives students made powerful use of Twitter, finding new ways to protest. *“Don’t give them content,”* says Matt. *“Create it yourself.”* Combining impressive background knowledge with typical teenage communication styles involving ‘burns’ and calling out names, they demanded action from those in power via social media. Their message caught on, and soon they were being contacted by the biggest names in the media.

The March For Our Lives youngsters succeeded in making themselves heard. Since they started speaking out, over 25 states have passed more than 50 laws, all consistent with their cause.

The Road to Change

To safeguard their future, it is vital for young people to be heard. It became March For Our Lives’ mission to get young people out to vote and to force high level decision-makers to listen. On their *Road to Change* tour through the US, they visited communities affected by gun violence to talk about solutions. They held town rallies and voter-registration events, and they spoke with local politicians, the media, and families of victims of gun violence. They went door-to-door to spread their message and motivate young people to vote. It worked.

Together with members of other youth-led organizations, March For Our Lives visited more than 80 communities in 2 months and registered thousands of voters. But according to the students, the impact of their tour can’t be measured in numbers alone. They have seen young people learn to make their voice heard, find a purpose in their community, and even run for office. Politicians, the media and the public have started listening to the next generation.

These teenagers understand that to truly make a difference, they need to speak up, and speak up loud. If they want to influence policy, they have to mobilize people to support their cause and change the dynamics of the public debate. And that’s exactly what they have done.