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# How To Prevent A Personal Tragedy From Becoming Your Personal Brand

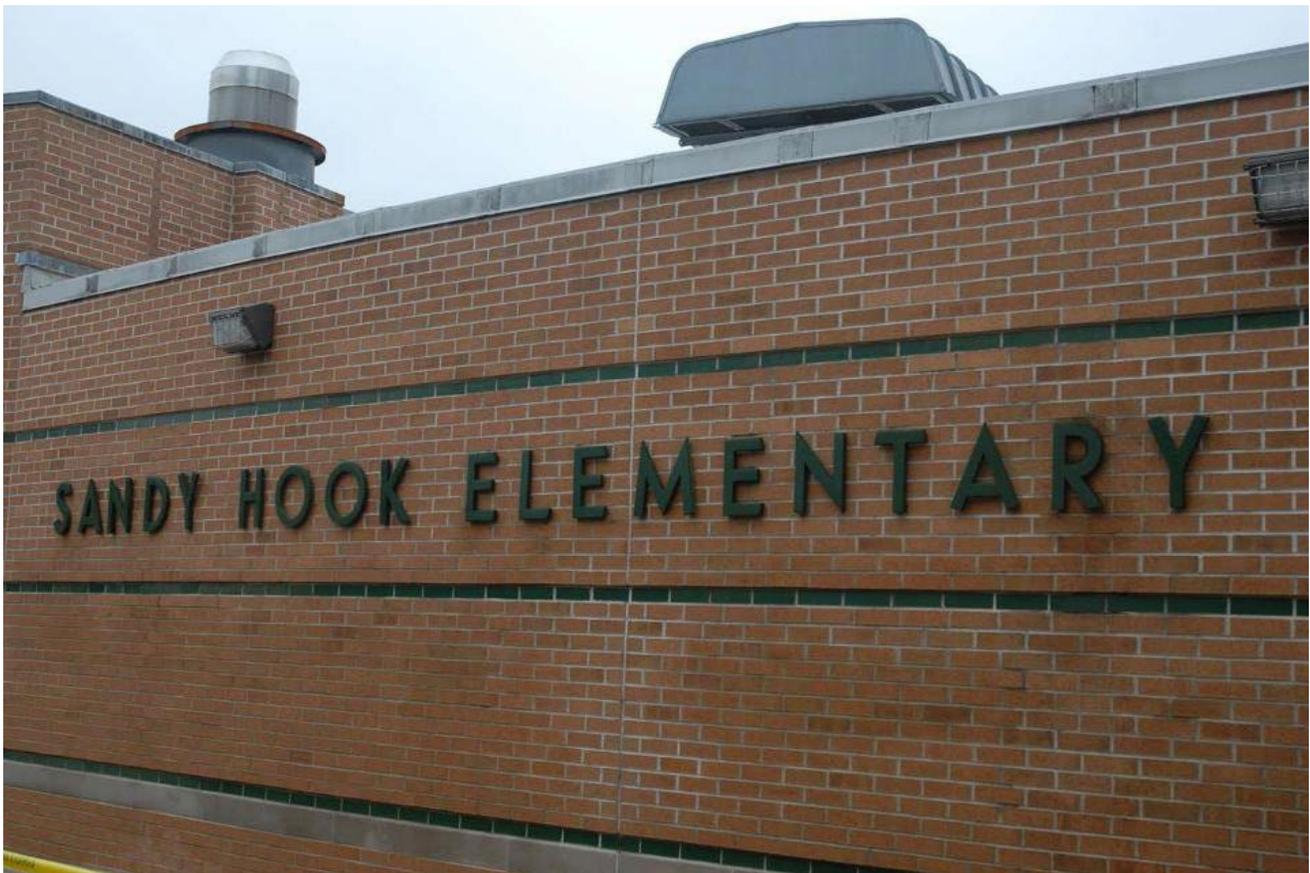
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*Spotting trends through a newscrafter's lens*

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Alissa Parker's 6-year-old daughter, Emilie, was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School along with 19 other children and seven adults in December 2012. This was the darkest moment of Alissa's life, but she was intent — even in those early days — on her story being one of hope, not tragedy.

During a [CBS News interview](#) in March 2013, Alissa recalled her meeting with Peter Lanza, father of gunman Adam Lanza, a little more than a month after Emilie was killed. Then — already — Alissa was sifting through her tragedy to find the fragments of hope. When asked what she had said to Peter Lanza, Alissa said, “I wanted to tell him that there was a lot of hope and opportunity to gain from this.”



NEWTOWN, CT - UNSPECIFIED DATE (Photo by Connecticut State Police via Getty Images)

When I met Alissa for the first time, her tragedy was fresh, having happened only days before. I was soon to go through a personal hell of my own, as a doctor would find that another tumor had made a home in my brain lining; I got my official diagnosis at Massachusetts General Hospital the same day that Alissa and her husband, Robbie, were meeting secretly with Peter Lanza at our Havas office in Wilton, Connecticut, a meeting we had arranged with Lanza's public relations adviser at Edelman. In fact, less than eight weeks later, on the day my PR

agency launched the website for the [Emilie Parker Art Connection](#), a charity that helps build local community art programs for children, I had 50 angry new stitches in my scalp. I'd just had a craniotomy, and I wasn't supposed to be working, but I detoured into our Connecticut office on the way home from the hospital. Then, maybe a week later, when I was rightfully supposed to be healing and resting on my sofa, I snuck off to the CBS taping. I also wasn't supposed to lift anything heavier than a laptop, which made it tricky when the older of Emilie's two younger sisters catapulted herself into my arms to give me a warm 4-year-old greeting.

What wasn't tricky was the decision to help the Parker family navigate the barrage of media requests and conspiracy theories directed at them. Through our shared work on the Emilie Parker Art Connection, I've watched Alissa counter her grief with grace, first through her blog [the Parker Five](#) and the pieces she wrote for the Huffington Post and other news outlets, then at speaking engagements before increasingly larger spellbound audiences.

Alissa would go on to cofound another nonprofit, [Safe and Sound Schools](#), along with fellow Sandy Hook parent Michele Gay. Her intent with Safe and Sound, she says, is to "turn her hindsight into others' foresight." Through this organization, she has begun speaking to communities across the country about her personal story and its takeaways for emergency preparedness.

But Alissa tells her story in the greatest detail in her book, [An Unseen Angel: A Mother's Story of Faith, Hope and Healing After Sandy Hook](#), out this April, and will continue in a speaking tour that is to follow. "Writing a book about losing Emilie wasn't something I had planned to do," [Alissa writes](#). "To begin with, I'm very private and reserved. Also, after Emilie died I couldn't bear to think about what had happened to her, much less write about it. Nor, I believe, do most people want to read about something so sad. But violence, grief and loss are not what this book is primarily about; at least, I prefer not to look at it that way. Although it contains tragedy, my story is ultimately not tragic. The story I feel compelled to share is one of help and healing."

Not long after my second brain surgery, I wrote [an article](#) called "What Having a Brain Tumor Can Do for Your Brand." I pointed to Sheryl Crow and Elizabeth Taylor as among those who had made their own brain tumors part of their personal and professional identities, as mine have become. My hardships, one nearly a decade ago and the second just four years ago, have turned me into an advocate, not a shut-in; made me more fearless, not less. I've been a compulsive do-gooder from birth, but my work in cause over the past decade has had a distinctly cerebral bent — focusing on brain health and veterans with traumatic brain injuries. Right now our team is doing some great work for the [Bob Woodruff Foundation](#) and for [Heads Together](#), which will benefit the [Home Base Program](#).

Alissa's life's work, too, has pivoted around all that she lost on a December morning. She could have let the world close in on her, but instead she stayed open to signs of life — unseen angels — in strangers, friends and sacred personal experiences that allowed her to see and feel Emilie in the small and simple occurrences of her daily life. Optimism and activism have become her brand. Like all the best brands, it works because it's authentic.

Today we're working with Alissa not on a crisis but on the important platforms she has developed. My brain is now healed, but it reels when I think of how this quiet young mom has harnessed her faith, talent and love to make her family an inspiration for anyone who needs to heal. A "personal brand" was the last thing Alissa ever wanted. But when a national tragedy thrust her into a national spotlight, she found a chance to make a difference. Within that spotlight, she also found her way out of darkness, as strangers and friends from around the country reached out to her to share their experiences of sensing Emilie's presence.

"Emilie had six wonderful years on this earth," writes Alissa in [An Unseen Angel](#). "She made every day beautiful. She saw the world in color... Through all the pain, I have come to feel this truth with every fiber in me: Emilie's was a beautiful life. I feel honored to have been a part of it."