

## REMEMBERING

# 'You Can't Imagine Living Without Your Daughter'

Remembering Reema and Erin, 15 years after VT tragedy.

BY BONNIE HOBBS  
THE CONNECTION

**T**his Saturday, April 16, will mark 15 years since the worst day in the lives of the Samaha and Peterson families of Centreville. That's when they each lost a child in the Virginia Tech massacre that took 32 lives.

Both Reema Samaha and Erin Peterson were 2006 Westfield High grads, and each was just 18. In high school, Reema was active in theater productions and was also an accomplished dancer. Erin was a standout player and senior-year captain on the Bulldogs girls' basketball team.

As college freshmen, Erin was majoring in International Studies; Reema was majoring in international relations and urban planning and minoring in French. Futures filled with bright possibilities stretched ahead of them. But a mentally troubled young man with automatic weapons stole it all and left their shocked, grieving families devastated.

It was a seemingly normal Monday morning in 2007, and Reema and Erin were in French class together in Norris Hall. When Reema's father learned about the shootings there, but didn't hear from her afterward, he called the school.

Joe Samaha asked if French classes were held in Norris Hall. When he found out they were, "My heart dropped." He and wife Mona and their two other children then headed to VT – where they learned Reema was, indeed, among the victims.

Erin's parents panicked, too, when they didn't hear from their daughter, so they drove to Blacksburg and were told she was in surgery. But the patient turned out to be another girl – and the next morning, Celeste and Grafton Peterson learned their only child had died the day before.

Since the tragedy, each parent has coped in their own ways. And although time may have dulled somewhat the sharp edges of the pain they feel, it's always with them – as are the memories of their children.

"Grief isn't something you ever put down," said Celeste Peterson. "It's just the way your life is now. You never forget and you never recover. Everything in my life is marked before Erin died and after Erin died."

"Reema guides us and is always in our prayers," said Mona Samaha, "I'm living hopefully and strongly, because that's how she would want me to. But it's a daily, inner workout to make a good day out of every day."

Her husband is still a Realtor, but she retired last summer from her job as a French Immersion teacher at Herndon Elementary. Daughter Randa is married, with three children, and son Omar is married, with two children.

Mona Samaha admitted she's had some "very bad times," over the years, but Reema's spirit and God help her calm down and feel better. At first, though, she said, "You can't



Reema Samaha



Reema Samaha before a Westfield High prom.

imagine living your life without your daughter. It was a total loss of my compass. Every time I was walking with Joe, I'd think, 'Why am I living? If my daughter is gone, what's the point of it?'"

The first 10 years, she said, "I tried to be strong for my other children, the community and my students, to honor Reema." And even therapy only helped so much. So the past four years, Mona "did a lot of personal effort, prayers, meditation and walks in the woods, talking to God. And every day was like a little curtain opening."

"Finally, thank God – and also with the



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE SAMAHA

From left, are Joe, Omar, Reema, Randa and Mona Samaha during a family vacation in July 2006.

birth of my grandchildren – it all helped me get my feet on the ground, bring me back to earth and appreciate life again. I'd been in my head for so long, but now I acknowledge the care people give each other and the beauty and miracles in life that are given to us. We just have to see and appreciate them."

Signs from Reema have also played a big part. A year ago, Mona wasn't feeling well, and Reema's friend, Ashley Dillard, called and shared a dream she'd had about Reema in heaven. She said Reema was happy, funny, witty and joking, like she always was. Dillard then told Mona stories about Reema's life that no one had ever told her (Dillard) and she'd have had no way of knowing.

"She said Reema told her, 'Many of my friends ask me for help, and I'm always happy to help them,'" said Mona. "Ashley also said Reema told her to tell me she's there for me, too, because I especially needed her help. Hearing that brought me back to my faith. When I give up, I ask Reema, the Virgin Mary and Jesus for help."

"Reema also told Ashley, 'I'm so happy there are so many babies and that they're naming them after me,' but this hadn't happened, yet," said Mona. "A week later, Randa called and told me she's pregnant with twins – but Reema already knew about them."

Omar's wife was also expecting a girl then; and two months later, Reema's closest cousin learned she was having a girl, too. Randa named her firstborn, a son, Beau Ameer ("Reema" spelled backwards and "prince" in Arabic). Omar's daughter is named Ellie Reema, and the cousin's daughter is Eva Reema.

"It's very touching and honoring," said Mona. "I'm happy Reema is still remembered and loved, and that this new generation will know about her. During Randa's high-risk pregnancy with her twin girls, I was so worried, and I asked Reema for help.

She then appeared to me in my mind and winked, like, 'C'mon, everything's going to be OK' – and it was."

Likewise, Joe said Reema's always by his side. "I have no doubt her spirit is never far," he said. "She's my inspiration for my work with the Virginia Tech Victims Family Outreach Foundation [see sidebar] and daily life, affirming that she's OK, we're OK and she's watching over us."

That work gave him a purpose that helped him in the aftermath of the tragedy. Yet for many years, he couldn't admit that something inside him was still amiss. "We call this a life journey," he said. "But the first eight years of my journey, I wasn't OK, and I needed help. I'd say, 'I'm fine,' but Mona realized something was wrong."

"Once I got help, a door opened, and I was able to do more in an easier and less stressful way," said Joe. "What helps me most is – not only having Reema on my shoulder, inspiring me – but accomplishing goals that are actionable and practical, and reaching out to others to make sure they're OK."

Reema wanted to learn Arabic as a second language, but it wasn't available at Virginia Tech; so, after her death, her parents created an Arabic Language and Cultural Center there. "It was my language in Lebanon and was what Joe's father spoke," explained Mona. "We also wanted to promote more understanding of Arabic culture." The university now offers an Arabic language major and minor with a tenured professor.

As the tragedy's 15th anniversary approaches, the Samahas will go to Virginia Tech for all the memorial events. "There's a candlelight vigil, interfaith prayer, family lunch and 5K," said Mona. "And the library has stories and displays about each victim. That day is always hard, but it's good that people still remember Reema."

## REMEMBERING



Erin Peterson



Erin and her dad, Grafton Peterson, in August 2006.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CELESTE PETERSON

# Doing Good in Her Name

## Celeste Peterson honors her child by serving her neighbors.

BY BONNIE HOBBS  
THE CONNECTION

Celeste Peterson's story is one of immeasurable loss. First, her only child died in the tragedy at Virginia Tech. In 2016, her husband, Grafton, succumbed to a heart attack. Then during the pandemic, she lost both her parents within nine months of each other. But through the Erin Peterson Foundation honoring her daughter, she's turned her heartache into a catalyst to help others.

"I could have broken down and felt sorry for myself, but my family built strong roots and I learned to bend," she said. "And I didn't have time; I had to keep moving, take care of things and clean out my parents' house. Since Erin passed away, I've had to deal with the affairs of my elderly family members who died. And when I was writing my mom's obituary, I thought to myself, 'I'm so tired of writing obituaries.'"

Peterson has developed tools to help her cope, day to day, and she said therapy has also helped. "My life is nothing like I thought it would be at this time," she said. "But you just acclimate the grief into it. I speak to and think about Erin and Grafton every day – they're embedded in me. I couldn't live in this house or do what I do if it wasn't for them."

"I take time to let off steam because I'm human," she continued. "Some days, I just don't feel like doing anything, so I allow myself that time to just be kind to myself. When I'm having a hard day, I can hear Erin and Grafton, plain as day, telling me it'll be all right and to pull it together. They give me strength, every single day."

"I'm also a spiritual person; I believe in God and pray every day. My grandmother told me, 'You can either decide to live or decide to die' – and I choose to live. My parents and family made me who I am, and [when I need guidance], I think about what Erin and Grafton would do and how they'd react."

After Erin's death, the last thing on Peterson's mind was starting a scholarship. "But

the community was so supportive and wanted to do something," she said. "And that summer, Pat Deegan, Erin's basketball coach at Westfield, and Greg Richter – whose daughter, Anna, went to school with Erin – approached me about it."

So she and her husband established the Erin Peterson Fund to continue their daughter's dedication to education and to helping those less fortunate. And each year, it's awarded two scholarships to deserving Westfield High seniors. So far, it's given away more than \$260,000 in scholarships and grants in Erin's memory. Celeste Peterson also began the Young Men's Leadership Group at the school.

"The fund helps them find their way," she explained. "It's a bridge between the school and where they're going in the world. And I'm standing in the middle, telling them I'm going to help them cross over, no matter what. Sometimes, they just need a little help and to know that someone cares about them. We all need that, and I've been extremely blessed to have it in my life."

The group isn't a club; students have to be recommended by Westfield's administrators, counselors and/or teachers. And those who've been in it for a while are allowed to recommend friends who'd also benefit from the program. They currently meet twice a month and plan to eventually return to weekly meetings. The staff includes the director of student services, subschool principals and teachers.

"We discuss current events, they learn proper etiquette and how to shake hands," said Peterson. "We also have speakers talk to them about, for example, finances, nutrition, what it means to be a man, taking care of themselves, etc. Right now, we're focusing on being polite, because the world is so mean. So we talk about what that looks like and how to react."

"We also do assessments of what they need," she continued. "And after every meeting, the staff and I debrief and discuss what to talk about next time. We decide if we need to pivot and talk about something



Athletic Erin Peterson, all dressed up.

else, based on what's going on in the school and in their lives that's causing them some angst."

Working with the principal of Stone Middle School, Peterson started a girls' group there. "I like to start at middle school, so the students' expectations are set about how they'll talk, dress and act when they get to high school," she said. "I also have a girls' group at Westfield. There are a total of 30 or more students in all three groups."

"I address the same things I did with Erin, when I was preparing to launch her into society," said Peterson. "I'd tell her, 'I want you to be a good kid and a good citizen and adult who contributes to society.' In a world of so many choices, kids really want parameters and want you to tell them what to do." She also takes the groups on field trips, such as college tours or visits to the Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C.

In addition, Peterson runs a Coats for Kids program. "I ask the Centreville Elementary social worker to tell me how many children need coats, what sizes, and if they're for boys or girls," she said. "The money comes from the fund; last year, we gave away 25 coats."

She looks out for older people, as well. For many years now, she's been bringing snack packs to the residents of the Forest Glen Se-

## Helping Others to Honor Those Who Were Killed

The Virginia Tech Victims Family Outreach Foundation (VTV) was established 12 years ago by the victims' families to address campus safety and security issues that helped lead to the 2007 tragedy in which 32 people were killed; 24, injured; and many more traumatized. Initially, the state funded it.

Joe Samaha, whose daughter Reema died, became the nonprofit's president. And Centreville's LuAnn McNabb, a close family friend, was its first director and was instrumental in getting legislation dealing with mental health and campus safety passed in Virginia's General Assembly.

As a result, colleges and universities must designate a point of contact to be notified should a student be involuntarily committed or discharged from a mental-health facility. This person would also facilitate the screening and referral of students with urgent mental-health needs and provide for expansion of services for them.

In addition, faculty and staff must report a student's threatening or aberrant behavior that may represent a physical threat to the community. They must also notify family members or guardians. And in grades K-12, school divisions must establish procedures for creating threat-assessment teams.

Over the years, VTV continued to help get new laws passed; and now, it's the leading independent advocacy group for campus safety in the U.S. Some of these state laws, plus amended federal law, are the first of their kind in the country and have become best practices nationwide.

"What we did was unique," said Samaha. "Then, two years ago, we started VTVCare – our program initiative to help victims of mass shootings, and their families, throughout the country, with their long-term care needs."

"We funded an endowment for this program and invested these funds in the stock market with a professional advisor," he said. "And the gains from the investment are what we donate to these victims." (To contribute, go to [www.vtvcare.org](http://www.vtvcare.org)).

This perpetual fund helps pay for the

SEE HELPING OTHERS, PAGE 9

nior Apartments in Centreville. "Erin was all about the community, and I am, too – especially helping people in need in the neighborhood," said Peterson. "During the pandemic, the Erin Peterson Fund gave away Walmart gift cards so people could buy food. Local school administrators or counselors would tell me how many people needed them, and I'd give the cards to the schools."

The fund also started the Fuel Station – a food pantry at Westfield for food-insecure students. (After the pandemic, Western Fairfax Christian Ministries and the school PTA took it over).

"The need is right here in our own community, and I grew up in a family that always took care of other people," explained Peterson. "But you get so much out of helping others. And this is the way for me to honor Erin and Grafton. I'm thankful to God that He blessed me with being Erin's mother for 18 years, and I'm serious about putting good into the community in her name."

To contribute to the Erin Peterson Fund, go to [www.erinpetersonfund.org](http://www.erinpetersonfund.org).

# Helping Others to Honor Those Who Were Killed

FROM PAGE 7

long-term, physical and psychological trauma-related care needs of mass-shooting survivors nationwide that insurance doesn't cover. Anyone who's been affected by a mass shooting – including family members of deceased individuals, injured or traumatized survivors, and those who were physically present during an event – is eligible.

“What we've learned is that the first two years after a tragedy, people are donating to help the victims and grants come into the various municipalities to establish resiliency centers,” said Samaha. “But typically, in year three, there are no funds left to help people on their lifetime journey. Their ongoing needs include physical injuries and mental trauma, like PTSD, that may arise years later. They

need therapy, but their insurance doesn't cover all of it – and that's where our fund comes in.”

Now, in a new role as VTV's Vice President of Development and Victim-Survivor Advocacy, Samaha helped spearhead the idea of a Virginia Mass Violence Care Fund to benefit all victims of mass violence in Virginia, including those injured or traumatized by the May 31, 2019 shooting in Virginia Beach.

If approved by the governor, it would pay for their out-of-pocket expenses not covered by insurance, begin three years after the mass-violence event and remain in perpetuity. Expenditures and disbursements from the fund would be made by the state treasurer. The first year's appropriation would be \$10,000,000 taken from the Commonwealth's

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## BULLETIN BOARD

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- ❖ May 5 – “Monarch Butterflies – Life Cycle and Migration” – Scott Schroth
  - ❖ May 19 – “Whale Watching in Baja” – Paul Wormeli
  - ❖ May 26 – “Vienna African American Trailblazers and Liberty Amendments – Gloria Runyon/Sylvia/DeeDee
- Students may attend one or all of the all spring classes for a \$55

fee and are encouraged to create their own schedule – attend classes all day or attend only one class. For a complete listing of classes or to register, visit the AIL page on the SCNOVA website at SCNOVA Adventures in Learning Spring 2022 or call the office at 703-281-0538. Visit [www.scnova.org](http://www.scnova.org) or contact the Office at 703-281-0538.



## Public Notice

### Updated weight limits on Virginia bridges and culverts

In accord with state and federal law, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) has imposed new or changed existing weight restrictions and installed new signage indicating the updated weight restrictions on the following bridges and culverts (structures) in Virginia within the last 30 days.

Jurisdiction	Fed Struc Id	Route #	Route Name	Crossing	Posted Date
SCOTT	16685	619	BIG STONY CREEK ROAD	BRANCH	3/30/2022
BLAND	3048	604	WALKERS CREEK ROAD	BIG WALKER CREEK #3	3/28/2022
WASHINGTON	19036	616	WALNUT GROVE ROAD	NORDYKE CREEK	3/28/2022
SMYTH	17394	16	B.F. BUCHANAN HIGHWAY	WHITE OAK BRANCH	3/23/2022
WASHINGTON	18891	58	GATE CITY HIGHWAY	BRANCH	3/23/2022
CRAIG	5503	615	CRAIGS CREEK ROAD	MILL CREEK	3/11/2022

The list above is not a comprehensive list of all structures with weight restrictions in the Commonwealth, but shows only structures that have new or changed weight restrictions within the last 30 days. The list contains only basic structure identification and location information and the date the new or changed weight restriction and signage became effective.

For a full listing of all bridge and culvert weight restrictions with detailed information about specific structures, including location data and actual weight limits, visit <https://www.virginiadot.org> and navigate to Info Center/Trucking Resources. This page references a posted structures report and a GIS map tool that contain detailed information about restricted structures in Virginia. To receive email notifications regarding new or updated weight restrictions for structures statewide, complete the sign-up form on the web page.

Notices regarding bridges and culverts with new or updated weight restrictions are published monthly by VDOT. For additional information or questions, please contact, [haulingpermits@vdot.virginia.gov](mailto:haulingpermits@vdot.virginia.gov).

*The Virginia Department of Transportation is committed to ensuring that no person is excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any of its programs or activities on the basis of race, color, or national origin, as protected by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If you need further information on VDOT's Title VI Program or special assistance for persons with disabilities or limited English proficiency, please contact the Virginia Department of Transportation's Title VI Program Specialist at 804-786-2730.*



## Special Connections Calendar 2022

Advertising Deadlines are the previous Thursdays unless noted.

### MARCH

- 3/2/2022.....Wellbeing
- 3/9/2022.....HomeLifeStyle
- 3/16/2022.....A+ Camps & Schools
- 3/23/2022.....Senior Living
- 3/30/2022.....Spring Family Fun

### APRIL

- 4/6/2022.....Wellbeing
- 4/13/2022.....HomeLifeStyle
- 4/20/2022.....A+ Camps & Schools
- 4/27/2022.....Senior Living

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# Helping Others to Honor Those Who Were Killed

FROM PAGE 9

General Fund and deposited into the Virginia Mass Violence Care Fund. There, it would gain interest – potentially, \$400,000/year – to help with victims’ needs, just like VTVCare does.

“Healing isn’t linear, but perpetual, and lasts a lifetime,” said VTV Co-Presidents Jody McQuade and Jennifer Herbstritt. “Our needs as survivors will wax and wane. Today many of us are still seeing therapists and seeking medical treatment for conditions related to the events of April 16, 2007.”

By the end of 2021, the 177 people defined by VTVCare as “VT families and injured survivors” had been reimbursed by the Virginia Tech victims’ 2009 settlement with the Commonwealth a total of \$645,000 for costs insurance wouldn’t cover. The funds came from court costs and fees, not taxpayer dollars. So, wrote McQuade and Herbstritt in their message to VTVCare members last Friday, “Long-term care assistance is crucial for survivors of mass shootings.”

They and Samaha are now awaiting the budget to see if it’ll make this mass-violence fund a reality and provide the money for it. Sen. Chap Petersen (D-34th) and Del. Kelly Convirs-Fowler (D-Virginia Beach) submitted it as a budget amendment request.

“This statewide fund will be the first of its kind in the nation,” said Samaha. “It’s practical, actionable, proactive, sustainable and perpetual. And the governor has indicated he’ll help create this fund. There’s no definition of mass violence in Virginia law. It could be a terrorist attack, like driving into a crowd, so we’re saying, ‘mass violence,’ not ‘mass shooting.’”

“It’s the 32 that were killed and 17, injured, that inspired this work, not just Reema,” continued Samaha. “You can’t heal in isolation, so we’re also reaching out to other groups across the country. What’s gotten me through is having a purpose – to keep honoring and remembering those who were killed and to do this work in their name.”

— BONNIE HOBBS

## ROUNDUPS

### Hidden in Plain Sight, April 20

Hidden in Plain Sight is a community-awareness program to educate parents on the signs of risky behavior in their children and teens. It’s a hands-on learning event enabling parents to experience current trends so they may look out for and keep their children safe.

It’s run by the Fairfax County Police Department, and the next program is set for Wednesday, April 20, at 7 p.m., at the Sully District Governmental Center, 4900 Stonecroft Blvd. in Chantilly. Register at <https://bit.ly/fcpdhips>. For more information, email [FCPDHIPS@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:FCPDHIPS@fairfaxcounty.gov).

### Car Seat Inspections, April 21

Parents may get their children’s car seats inspected on Thursday, April 21, from 5-8:30 p.m., outside the Sully District Police Station. It’s at 4900 Stonecroft Blvd. in Chantilly. Inspections are done on a first-come, first-served basis. Participants are asked to wear a mask and adhere to social-distancing and safety precautions.

They should also install the child safety seat themselves, so the inspection can be performed. The seat will be properly re-installed, if necessary, and parents will be taught how to install the seat properly, in the future. Another car-seat inspection is scheduled for May 5, at the same place and time.

### Casey’s Car Show & Spring Fest: April 24

The fifth annual Casey’s Automotive Car Show & Spring Fest is Sunday, April 24, from 12:30-3:30 p.m., at 4260 Entre Court (off Walney Road) in Chantilly. Admission is free. The fun includes a vehicle contest – with cars and trucks ranging from classic to modern, a silent auction, food and ice cream trucks, and a moon-bounce and children’s activities.

All proceeds from this family-friendly event go to local nonprofit, Ellie’s Hats, which provides hats to children with cancer. (Rain date: May 1). For more information, email [carshow@caseysautomotive.com](mailto:carshow@caseysautomotive.com). To display a vehicle in the show, register it at <https://caseysautomotive.com/about-caseys-automotive/car-show-spring-fest/>.

## LETTERS

FROM PAGE 5

The County is proposing to issue more bonds in 2023 and future years. For FY 2023, the County debt for bond interest is \$43.9 million or 2.8% of the county budget. In the good times as the economy booms, why does the County feel they must keep issuing bonds? I have read that Fairfax County wants taxpayers to approve a \$180 million bond issue for WMATA this November but has so far failed to respond on how these

funds will be used. Is this true?

The FCPS has had reductions in students over the past two years and is now down to approximately 178,000 students. As I understand, the FCPS has had a reduction of around 10,000 students and yet the FCPS budget continues to rise. Why is that?

**Charles McAndrew**  
Oak Hill  
Board Member of the Fairfax County  
Taxpayers Alliance

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## Going, Going, I Wish They Were Gone

By KENNETH B. LOURIE



All those Charmin and Cottonelle television commercials for “the go”/“down there care.” As my late mother used to say about so many nauseating subjects: “It’s enough already.” I realize toilet paper is a staple, especially during a pandemic, but is it necessary that there are so many television advertisements? They’re appearing so often that I’ve even seen these competing companies/products advertise during the same commercial break. Not exactly back-to-back, but very nearly so. Talk about overkill. If these brands aren’t careful, they’re going to kill the goose that laid ply at their doorstep.

I mean, how much prodding/encouragement do I need every day to assist me with my toilet paper decisions? Not nearly as much as I’m getting, that’s for sure. How many more times must I see that adolescent bear wiggle his butt? And how many more times must I hear about treating “the skin that I don’t see as well as I treat the skin that I do see?” No more, please? I have enough visuals of forearms being wiped to last me a lifetime. I know that toilet paper sales are a huge business with endless repeat customer buys, but I’ve reached my point of no return. As in there’s no more return on their advertising investment in my household. We have been saturated with toilet paper problems/solutions so much so that if I never see another television commercial, funny or not, it will be soon enough for me.

Besides, I’m a grown man. I know what works for me – and what doesn’t. And that awareness most definitely includes toilet paper and all its features and benefits – and innuendos. I may be stubborn or a creature of consumer habit – or merely protective of my privacy, but all this recurring toilet paper market penetration/saturation is becoming too much to bear. I’m not a prude in the least, but I do feel as if there are certain subjects/descriptions which are off limits – or rather should be. However, the recent spate of toilet paper verbal and visual manipulation has crossed the line I never thought needed to be drawn because it was clear to everybody that it already existed. Apparently, the rules of advertising aren’t aware of these lines.

I understand that market share and profit are crucial to a commercial ventures/success/viability. But to invoke a famous question from the 1954 McCarthy hearings: “Where’s your decency?” Gone. That’s where if the frequency and substance of these toilet paper advertisements are allowed to continue. Enough is enough, which for Scott brands is 1000 sheets. For me however, it’s really none of anybody’s business what I do in the privacy of my own bathroom. Whether I use an off-brand, single, double, or triple ply or paper infused with aloe. I’m happy to be left to my own devices. I’ll figure it out and the less the advertisers have to do with it, the better.

*Kenny Lourie is an Advertising Representative for The Potomac Almanac & The Connection Newspapers.*