

# THE INTERVIEW:

## KRISTINA ANDERSON

## KOSHKA FOUNDATION



**K**ristina Anderson founded the Koshka Foundation for Safe Schools after becoming one of the most critically injured survivors of the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy. The non-profit organization is dedicated to helping local communi-

ty and school stakeholders work together to prevent, respond and heal in the aftermath of school violence.

Shot three times, Anderson returned to graduate from Virginia Tech with a degree in international studies and foreign languages, and is now a resource to school administrators, teachers and students within K-12 and higher education for violence prevention initiatives and ways to increase individual personal safety awareness. The Koshka Foundation also partners with law enforcement agencies and first responders to provide educational presentations on surviving an active shooter from a survivor's perspective, and sharing lessons learned for recovery plans. She serves as co-chair with John Meza of the NTOA Wellness Committee.

**Q:** SO MANY OF OUR MEMBERS HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO HEAR YOU RETELL YOUR STORY OF WHAT HAPPENED ON APRIL 16, 2007. WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO TURN THIS TRAGEDY INTO SOMETHING POSITIVE?

**A:** I believe that as a community that experienced this terrible loss, we each have a shared responsibility to do our part to honor those who lost their lives, and to share lessons to help others prevent a similar event. In a conversation recently, a psychologist related the concept of “terrible knowledge” to me; once we know or are privy to something about the world (either through direct experience or association), we feel compelled to share it with others in hopes to educate, better prepare and train so they may be able to prevent or at least mitigate the risk. Very simply, I don’t want anyone else to experience what my classmates and professors did.

I have been very fortunate to connect with survivors and first responders from other acts of violence who have continued to share their journeys and friendships. There is no handbook to living as a survivor of a mass shooting, but there is enormous healing and potential for growth when we connect people from different events, and I’m very grateful for the opportunity to further those connections.

Lastly, I believe that by sharing my experience, it may help communities hold the importance of emergency preparedness in a more serious light. Organizations such as NTOA ensure that our first responders are trained, yet I think there is still culture-changing to be accomplished for school

administrators and other safety stakeholders to understand their role, and to train in conjunction with first responders.

**Q: HOW DID THAT EXPERIENCE SHAPE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OR VIEW OF THE LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNITY?**

**A:** I have always held respect for law enforcement, but the events of April 16, 2007, began a personal lifelong commitment to show gratitude for every officer who worked and responded that tragic day on our campus, as well as those who serve our cities and schools nationwide. Speaking with some of the responding officers since 2007, and experiencing their honesty, courage and humility, is very grounding. While some express their actions on April 16, 2007, as having done “what they’re supposed to do,” the sheer promptness and coordination of their response deserves profound acknowledgement and appreciation.

**Q: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE KOSHKIA FOUNDATION NOW AND IN THE FUTURE?**

**A:** The role of the foundation, thus far, has been helping survivor voices become part of the discussion in how active threat response, and prevention, is taught to the public. I hope to advance this in the future to incorporate additional perspectives. It may be difficult for law enforcement to reach out and contact survivors of violent crimes, yet there are people on the other sides of the doors they breach and homes they enter, and I think we, as the benefactors of their bravery, can have an opportunity to voice our experience and appreciation. We will help serve as a bridge, connecting groups (school administrators, first responders, members of the community) to personal stories and tangible takeaways from previous acts of violence around what can be done to better mitigate and take care of survivors going forward.

**Q: DO YOU BELIEVE THERE HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN HOW COLLEGE CAMPUSES PREPARE FOR AND RESPOND TO ACTIVE SHOOTER EVENTS?**

**A:** Yes, campus law enforcement and public safety departments have continued to push training and education based on takeaways from the Virginia Tech response, which set a strong example and model on the value and importance of a fidelity to training and relationship building. Many of us have now seen photographs of officers from Virginia Tech, Blacksburg Police Department and other agencies, wearing different uniforms, working jointly and quickly to treat those impacted. Thankfully, I have seen many departments adopt their training to ensure active shooter is included in emergen-

cy management plans, as well as plans for breaching tools and hopefully, acknowledgement of victims upon rescue by medics. For the next phase, I hope that the emphasis of training paramedics and firefighters alongside law enforcement is continued, as well as emphasis on how we prepare and inform our community members of not only what to do in a situation but how to help prevent it by improved sharing of information.

**Q: IN YOUR RECENT EXPERIENCES, HAS DISCUSSING PTSD AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONGST THE LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMUNITY BECOME MORE ACCEPTABLE?**

**A:** Yes, I believe so, although most of my experience in discussing trauma symptoms and personal journeys with law enforcement are in smaller interactions, one-on-one, so I can’t speak to larger departmental changes. To continue to move the needle, we need to understand we’re (hopefully) in the middle of a culture shift, and that the road of recovery and healing is a very personal one. We have to respect everyone’s timeline and process, and understand that it is completely natural to hold certain memories and feelings with us forever. The most dangerous thing we can do about mental wellness is to neglect the topic. Law enforcement holds maintaining and challenging physical fitness as a very important life focus; what kinds of improvements and life changes are possible if the same attention is paid to maintaining mental wellbeing?

**Q: WHAT ROLE WILL THE NTOA WELLNESS COMMITTEE SERVE IN ADDRESSING THESE ISSUES?**

**A:** The Wellness Committee will work to help begin the conversation within NTOA membership to better understand the specific experiences and variables that impact recovery for tactical officers, to help offer some practical solutions and identify areas that need further research. Through a short survey and a panel session at the upcoming annual conference, we hope to allow for multiple channels for NTOA members to share their personal perspectives, advice and experiences that may help others further their own resiliency. We understand that traumatic critical events are very complex and private issues, and we are greatly appreciative of members who are willing to share what they have learned and create meaning following crisis.

See an article introducing the NTOA Wellness Committee on page 10 of this issue.