



## The Immensity of Love: *Chalk Hill becomes Sandy Hook Elementary*

“The noblest service comes from nameless hands and the best servant does their work unseen.”  
-Oliver Wendell Holmes-

Perhaps more than most, or at least in a unique way, readers and contributors of East Coast Home & Design understand how crucial and how complex the creation of solid infrastructure is to the success of any building or system. Everything is subject to the domino effect whereby one piece goes missing and the tightly coordinated chain of events grinds to a halt. Imagine then, the Herculean task of converting Chalk Hill School, built 43 years ago in the hills of Monroe into a welcoming new home for the kids of Sandy Hook Elementary. In five days’ time.



From the website The Monroe Patch.

This is not an easy story to tell - the paradox is such that the people who were and continue doing the most good, are those who receive the least attention; firefighters, police, family friends, technicians, computer giants, custodians, a host of townspeople and administrators from all kinds of backgrounds. Nobody can speak for these folks, and for the main, they don’t want to *talk*, they’re busy *doing*, the last thing they want is to yank the attention spotlight into their personal zip code. Many members of many trades showed up to take care, rebuild, and offer help, most have shunned any publicity - they most emphatically believe that was not what this was about. I think above all, that speaks to the integrity of this situation.

My intent in sharing this story with you is to, first, do no harm. As you will see, those with whom I have spoken want it made clear that they had only a very small part in the overall effort to create a new somewhere for the kids, parents, teachers and administrators of Sandy Hook.

That same respect and protective presence was witnessed by Connecticut viewers and all those around the world who watched the difficult events unfold as Governor Danell Malloy stepped in with all the powers of the State of Connecticut behind him. The state’s initial response was one of providing support, resources and a centering presence. There are many moving parts in a

crisis like this, and the number of moving parts increases exponentially with time. With the Governor on scene, he could call in specific state agencies to participate in the assessment of what was happening, define the substantive needs, and develop resources that could be implemented immediately. According to one state official, “We’ve done our best to send a message that the town and its people are extremely competent, they have all the skills and resources to work this through – while at the same time acknowledging that they have been confronted with an unimaginable set of circumstances.”

As reported by the Newtown Patch in December, within hours of the shooting Superintendent of Schools, James Agostine extended the offer to use Monroe’s Chalk Hill. That got the ball rolling; miracles would ensue.

Brian Quinn is someone I knew many years ago when he first started his business, Wholesale Computer Exchange Inc. in Monroe CT. Fortuitously, we reconnected this past year and picked up our friendship exactly where we had left it. It is one of those lovely affinities you sometimes get in life. He is among those who insists he only had a tiny part in the recreation of Chalk Hill but I prevailed upon him to share what it looked like from his perspective. These people are Brian’s friends, neighbors and colleagues; his business supplies the local schools, police and towns with computer equipment, so he knows all the players and was sharply aware that the very reality of the switch to Chalk Hill had to stay below the radar. The overwhelming presence of the media and the concomitant hype was exacerbating the eviscerating exposure and vulnerability already being experienced by all of those impacted by the drama.



When Brian received a phone call Sunday morning, December 16<sup>th</sup> from Barbara Yaeger, Director of Social and Senior Services in Monroe, he was beyond ready to help. He had posted some information to Facebook about what was going on in Newtown and suddenly found himself inundated by offers from all over the country to help. Explaining that he was not in a position to coordinate volunteer efforts (too many people from everywhere were already descending on the town) he was experiencing the same frustration as everyone who wanted to “do something.” Toward that end he had already quietly let it be known that his computer warehouse was open 24/7 for whatever any of the trades or utilities working on Chalk Hill needed, no charge.

Finally, here was a chance to take action. Barb had been conducting a clothing and outerwear drive with all of the donations stored at Chalk Hill School. She had to get it all out of the school and back to the senior center. She told Brian that she was getting ready to make runs day and night and wondered if he could bring his big SUV to help.

“What type of racks do you have?” Brian asked.  
“Floor standing, rolling racks,” came the reply. ‘Lots of them.’  
“I can do lots better than my SUV.”



Brian, his wife Suzi, and Barb set to work emptying his 21 foot long enclosed trailer of snow mobiles, ATV units, dirt bikes and assorted car parts. Within an hour all 44' of his truck and trailer was rolling up to Chalk Hill ready to move anything and everything out of the way. He spoke with an officer who was keeping a wary eye out for the press, they agreed to create a list of license plate numbers of those authorized for entry. Miraculously, the media had not yet twigged to what was going on.

With mixed emotions, this was the school his kids had attended, Brian walked into a frenzy of activity. Visually it must have seemed incredibly chaotic but-- somehow, some way -- people were making it work. This had been a middle school so everything, absolutely everything, had to be re-sized for elementary age kids. Drinking fountains, bathroom facilities, chairs, desks, lockers...

First Selectman Steve Vavreck wanted Chalk Hill ready for the kids by Wednesday. Psychologically, this was a crucial piece to have in place – out of control events require as many concrete and regulated elements as possible. It was so important that the kids, the staff and parents could envision someplace safe, that there existed a mental and physical construct which they would be able to call home.

However, since 2010, Chalk Hill had been used as a warehouse; the middle school theater department was storing heaps of costumes and props there, Parks & Rec had been storing all their gear in the front portion of the building and EMS held classes and also kept all their

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apparatus and materiel at the school. Different combinations of crews were working 24 hours a day to strip out every kind of material imaginable and to install all new everything. At one point, it was estimated that there were over 500 people in the building. Walking and talking meetings were ongoing with fire and building inspectors, electricians, technologists, safety consultants, contractors and many, many more. All while the reality of what happened in Newtown continued to play out. There was a powerful shared sense of what needed to happen and a conviction that it would be done. By Wednesday.

Meanwhile, it is important to remember that a crisis of this magnitude has far reaching aftershocks that manifest in all kinds of ways. Bernie Sippin, 85 years young, is the owner of Sippin Energy based in Monroe, CT. He and his three sons, Gary, Dave and Mark know everybody in the surrounding towns and socialize with many of them. In fact, some of them live on the same streets as families who lost children. During the ongoing nightmare, calls came in for emergency service, two of them from devastated families. The techs came back from the calls, deeply upset, in one case the entire furnace system was literally on its last legs, and at another home, the oil tank was shot. Quietly and without fanfare, the Sippin family donated a top-of-the-line furnace system and a new oil tank. Company techs insisted on using their free time to install everything and ensure that staying warm would not be something grieving families had to even think about.

Lenovo Computers, best known as makers of the ThinkPad, desktops and now servers, offered whatever was needed. So too did WatchGuard Technologies, specializing in IT security, firewalls, and security solutions. But there was no need. “The Monroe Board of Ed Technology Team had been on site since 7:00a.m. Saturday morning. “They were way ahead of the curve,” Brian said. “And they actually had the building up and running. When I got there they were testing wires, lighting up network switches, trying to get all the electronics you would need for a school up to full operational readiness.”

According to ChannelProNetwork, two more angels came to the rescue that Sunday morning in the form of Alison Rossi and Dawn Soucy, from Atrion, an IT services company based in R.I. They had to modify and then expand and create a network that could accommodate critical infrastructure for entities like the FBI and the Red Cross. Writer Colleen Frye goes on to explain that equipment was grabbed from inventory, from spares, from anywhere and everywhere, all of it donated along with the time of multiple employees of the technology team who drove down from Warwick, R.I. Often overlooked in terms of sheer willingness to help in any way, are some of the big boys behind the scenes like Cisco who, “allowed Atrion to purchase networking equipment, the phone system, and wireless access points and controllers at 100 percent discount.” It was imperative that the families, school officials and all those working on what was becoming Sandy Hook Elementary School, be able to maintain communications. Accordingly, another of the big boys, AT&T set up a temporary cell tower opposite Chalk Hill at Fawn Hollow Elementary School.

The custodians, administrators and staff of Sandy Hook and employees of Monroe had also been on site since 7:00a.m. Saturday, working furiously to get the building empty so the rebuilding could occur. People were bringing in supplies, cleaning and painting surfaces, holding the hands that needed holding.



Brian said he was glad he had hard physical labor to engage him, he could hurl the energy of all his roiling emotions into productive activity. But then at one point, someone noted one of the staff members from Sandy Hook, and then an administrator; quietly walking the halls as they had the day before, checking to see how they could make it look more like what the kids had known. To a man, the workers stopped and watched with what I think is fair to describe as reverence, for these extraordinary guardians of Newtown’s future.

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Truck load after truck load was removed from the premises. Brian worked with the EMS folks to purge everything out of the school – they brought in dumpsters and filled them with old TV’s, recycling, chairs, pipes, you name it. “We were told,” explained Brian, “that Sunday was our day - we had to make our piece happen and then we had to bug out. Tractor-trailers from United Van

Lines would be arriving Monday night.” By that time, word had gotten out – police and other officials were running triple time trying to promote access by the rebuilders and keep well-meaning but hugely invasive volunteers and members of the media away.



During the day Monday, the custodial teams kept at it. One official explained that their loyalty and commitment to the kids and the school was fierce, there wasn't any way they would take so much as a break until all the painting was completed, the floors waxed, the cafeteria able to serve food. That night, escorted by police, the United Van Lines tractor trailers began to arrive.

By Wednesday, the school was ready. Officially, it had been decided to push back the start of school until the New Year for the students of Sandy Hook Elementary, but still, people came. With the support of law enforcement and state leaders they were made welcome.

They came in twos and threes; kids, faculty, parents. Just to look, to see where the new school was. What it looked like. Watching the faces of the kids as they came in was an amazing experience for officials. Each classroom had been lovingly and meticulously recreated by teachers and staff; backpacks, crayons, holiday decorations were as they had last seen them. Nobody was pretending this was not a different place, but the miracle that had been wrought was that it was a *familiar* place; filled with the colors and shapes, the visual ambiance the kids recognized in their hearts as their schoolrooms.

As Commissioner of the Department of Children & Families, Joette Katz, is someone who has experience with the kind of reality now facing everyone in Newtown and Connecticut. “As Commissioner of DCF I have presented an outline of what we, in conjunction with our sister agencies, have done in response to what happened at Sandy Hook. That information is available on our web site. On a personal note, I want the citizens of Newtown, the police, the parents, the politicians, faculty and administrators of Newtown to know that being on the ground with all of you, through these incredibly dark times has been the most profound experience of my life. I know I speak for every member of our team, all those who have worked with you and by you these last five weeks, that we are here for the long run in whatever ways you think we can be helpful.”

This state may have had its proverbial butt kicked, but we have some of the finest, and as far as I'm concerned, most elegant souls anywhere. If you are moved to want to support all those whose hearts are broken, I can offer you some constructive ways to do that. You've heard it said in the weeks since the incident, that people of the town do not want to be identified as the *The Tragedy in Newtown*, as so many media outlets have proclaimed it. They want it known that there is light and love and hope and a refusal to subsume within the darkness. For now, they really need all the space and privacy in the world. These people are overwhelmed in a way none of us can begin to fathom.

If you are moved to do something, you can go to [Sippin.com](http://Sippin.com) and make a donation for the Sandy Hook School Support Fund. You can visit the DCF website <http://www.ct.gov> and volunteer as <sup>5</sup>

a mentor. You can go to this link <https://newtown.uwwesternct.org/> and the United Way will see that your donation goes to the right place. You can visit Newtown and support the town's economy by stopping to buy something in a store. One individual in Westport simply put up a sign that said "Pray for Newtown". The people of Newtown will, in time, continue to find ways to succeed at redefining themselves and their town. There is a precedent for this, one you should know about. Columbine. Again, the single term that holds so much... and yet. The legacy has evolved into something far different; something called Rachel's Challenge.

If you don't already know about it, you won't believe it. Any words I use to describe it will sound like over-the-top hyperbole, but I assure you that is not the case. I don't make promises lightly, but I will promise you this: it will change you. I don't usually put content-dependent links in print magazines, but in this case, I really must. If you are near a computer, if you have your smart phone, go to this link:  
<http://www.rachelschallenge.org/big-picture/programs/>

If not, take this magazine back home or to work with you and check it out from there. Rachel's Challenge has been in Connecticut in almost a dozen towns and the power of the movement just keeps growing. It is too soon for Newtown to follow suit, though I have no doubt they will one day. And until that day we will keep them in our hearts and prayers. When you think of Newtown, focus on how people are choosing to respond with love: this was under a friend's windshield wiper as she exited Trader Joe's in Fairfield just this past week. It had a pack of M&Ms taped to it:

**26 Acts of Kindness**  
 in honor of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting victims

You are the recipient of # 24. In honor of Allison

<p>♡ 1. Charlotte Bacon 6</p> <p>♡ 2. Daniel Barden 7</p> <p>♡ 3. Rachel Davino 29</p> <p>♡ 4. Olivia Engel 6</p> <p>♡ 5. Josephine Gay 7</p> <p>♡ 6. Ana M. Marquez-Greene 6</p> <p>♡ 7. Dylan Hockley 6</p> <p>♡ 8. Dawn Hocksprung 47</p> <p>♡ 9. Madeleine F. Hsu 6</p>	<p>♡ 10. Catherine V. Hubbard 6</p> <p>♡ 11. Chase Kowalski 7</p> <p>♡ 12. Jesse Lewis 6</p> <p>♡ 13. James Mattioli 6</p> <p>♡ 14. Grace McDonnell 7</p> <p>♡ 15. Anne Marie Murphy 52</p> <p>♡ 16. Emilie Parker 6</p> <p>♡ 17. Jack Pinto 6</p> <p>♡ 18. Noah Pozner 6</p>	<p>♡ 19. Caroline Previdi 6</p> <p>♡ 20. Jessica Rekos 6</p> <p>♡ 21. Avielle Richman 6</p> <p>♡ 22. Lauren Rousseau 30</p> <p>♡ 23. Mary Sherlach 56</p> <p>♡ 24. Victoria Soto 27</p> <p>♡ 25. Benjamin Wheeler 6</p> <p>♡ 26. Allison N. Wyatt 6</p>
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*The extra blank sheet given to you is so that you can photocopy it and keep the 26 Acts of Kindness going in their honor.*

Share what was done for you and/or what you have done for others on Twitter #26Acts or facebook.com/26acts.