

A FAMILY COPE WITH SHOOTING, ENSUING FAME

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Author: Mary Schmich.

It has been hard to fall asleep and they've all been getting up too late, and her housekeeping has gone to hell. Everything these past three weeks, she says, has been amazing, weird, surreal.

How weird that her bookish family of public radio listeners has been photographed by People magazine. How surreal that she has put Peter Jennings' people on hold because Dan Rather's people were on the line. How amazing that suddenly her opinion matters so much that her by line is in the paper.

This is Miriam Wolfe's life now that the world knows her as Ephraim's mom.

"Are you Ephraim's mom?" strangers come up and ask. "He's so inspiring!"

Miriam Wolfe is 42, has six kids and ordinarily lives a quiet life in a West Rogers Park neighborhood where Orthodox Jews mingle comfortably with Indians, Pakistanis and Russian Jewish immigrants. But in these few weeks since her 15-year-old son was shot in the leg by a white supremacist, she has become a public voice for her family and her faith.

And besides thinking it's very weird, she's not sure how she feels about it all.

"Tiananmen Square gripped me a lot more emotionally than this," she says, sitting in the cool, cluttered basement where she home-schools her two youngest daughters.

Tiananmen Square?

She smiles. As a Northwestern psychology student several years ago--the only undergrad with six kids, she jokes--she learned a lot about the mind's wily ways.

"When something hits close to home," she says, "your brain puts a lot of emotional padding between your psyche and the event."

The "event" occurred a few blocks away, as her son and a friend walked down a tranquil street on the Jewish Sabbath. Ben Smith, a young acolyte of a so-called church run by a racist nobody named Matthew Hale, fired from his car and then sped off on his suicidal two-state hunt for Asians, blacks and Jews.

Now, at 10:30 on this Thursday morning, Ephraim is still asleep. His mom figures he needs it, even though he's down from two crutches to one, and the leg doesn't ache so much at night and a scab has covered the wound. Actually, she says, deprived of Rollerblading and basketball, Ephraim's major complaint is boredom. "That guy Smith," he sometimes gripes, "he ruined my summer."

The Wolfes are a close family, and when Ben Smith shot Ephraim, he wounded them all.

Ephraim's younger sisters, ages 10 and 12, cling to their mother more than usual and have started seeing a psychiatrist. Ephraim's father, a physician, has focused on his work.

And yet these weeks haven't been all bad.

Before Ephraim was shot, his parents might not have known he would respond with such bravery and eloquence. He had always been a good boy, but he was a sickly child who struggled through a speech impediment.

So his mother marvelled at his poise in front of the TV cameras. She was in awe when he stood up at a vigil, in the presence of the mayor, and brought the crowd to tears and thunderous applause by talking about the need to surmount hatred without fear.

"We're very proud of him," she says, with a fond laugh, "but it's like, 'Who is that kid?' We're schlepping him to speech therapy for years, and now he's a public speaker."

Ben Smith shot several of the Wolfes' friends as well, but Miriam says the others have been reluctant to talk in public. For her, talking is both a distraction and a duty.

"The obligation is to society," she says, "to help our nation think about and discuss what leads to events like this and what we need to do as individuals, families, communities and a nation to prevent future tragedies."

She says it's to further that conversation, and not for money, that the family has filed suit against Hale, his so-called church, the dealer who sold Smith the gun and Smith's parents.

It will be awhile before the Wolfes re-establish their household rhythms. For three weeks, Miriam hasn't been able to take her normal route to the Jewish shops on Devon Avenue. She didn't want to pass the spot where her son was shot.

But earlier this week, Ephraim took her there. She examined the street, the fence, the smattering of blood on the sidewalk. It moved her a little closer to reclaiming a life that will never be quite the same.

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