

## COURTNEY ROSS SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



### COURTNEY ROSS

is a senior at Chardon High School. In her free time she plays competitive volleyball on a travel team. She also enjoys making scarves, listening to music, volunteering at the food bank, horseback riding and swimming. She has been accepted to Slippery Rock and Walsh Universities and plans to pursue a doctorate in Physical Therapy.

It was a chilly February morning in the heart of the Snowbelt. I was sitting in the school cafeteria conversing with my friends when I heard a terrible sound. I instinctively threw myself to the floor and hid under a table in terror. I will never forget the hatred that I saw in T.J.'s eyes as he began to shoot several boys just 20 feet away from me. I will never forget the fear in those boy's faces as T.J. continued on his rampage. I witnessed their bloodshed. The cafeteria worker's scream for us to hide in the kitchen will always resonate in my mind. We sat shaking in terror waiting for rescue. Help came and I was questioned by the FBI, SWAT, police and sheriff. Finally, I was allowed to leave and see my parents. With knots in my stomach I waited the entire day for news, hoping and praying for a text back from my friend Russell, who had been severely wounded. Later I learned I would never hear from him again; his life was taken from him. The day has forever changed me, my fellow students, my community and the families of those lost.

I reflect on that day and wonder what created such hatred in T.J., allowing him to kill his peers? What broke him? What made him hate: a deprived family life, bullying, jealousy, the pressures of being a teenager, all of these? I believe that our society is broken and what T.J. did is proof of this. Hatred is rampant in this world! Our culture lacks empathy. So what can I do to promote empathy? How can I change the world? I must demonstrate the change that I want to see in humanity and help build an empathetic culture.

I have chosen to move forward from that horrific day in a positive manner by spreading awareness of a movement known as AC4P (Actively Caring for People) which promotes kindness on a daily basis. I have had the opportunity to spread their message of kindness and compassion, and helped foster positive exchanges between individuals. To raise awareness, I have used my voice through motivational speaking to my church, city council and local schools. We are in the process of creating a program for our elementary and middle school students to teach them now to be more kindhearted. I have asked for donations for AC4P wristbands. The money I have raised has been forwarded to other communities affected by similar shooting tragedies such as Aurora, Colorado and Sandy Hook Connecticut.

I can change the world; we can change the world together. What if someone had shown T.J. kindness at the right time in his life; could that have changed his actions one cold day in February? Could caring and demonstrating empathy for someone prevent a tragedy such as I witnessed and prevent future tragedies? Performing just one random act of kindness a day could "Stop the Hate" – think about it!

