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Memories of my sister, Rhonda, who died in a mass shooting in Sacramento in 1982 | *Opinion*

BY ROCKIE LYONS SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE

MAY 27, 2024 5:00 AM





The author's sister, Rhonda, with the author's children, Heather, age five, and Kim, age one. *Rockie Lyons*



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On October 1, 1982, [12 people were shot at an end-of-summer party](#) in North Sacramento at the Mother Lode Bar on Silica Avenue. My sister, Rhonda, was one of three people who died that night. She was 26.

The day after the shooting, I was watching CNN. Suddenly, a short video clip showed gunshot victims quickly moving into ambulances at the Mother Lode. I was stunned. One of them was Rhonda, lying on her right side with a large bandage around her abdomen where she was bleeding out. She was wearing a bright orange top, jeans, a

sandal on her right foot and a cast on her left foot where she had torn a ligament in her big toe. In the video, she moved her left arm, confirming she was still alive. Three hours later, she died as a Jane Doe on the operating table.

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Victim identification was a low priority while rushing the wounded into ambulances.

For more than 40 years, I've thought about that video clip and sometimes questioned if it existed or if it was a dream. How surreal it was to see my sister on national news as an unknown mass shooting victim. It was only a fluke that I had the TV on that

night since we had three small children who were usually demanding my attention, especially early in the evening when they were winding down the day.

OPINION

About 20 years after my sister was murdered, I visited CNN as part of a work business trip. During a tour of the TV studio, we learned how weather broadcasters stand in front of a green screen pointing at imaginary cities on a map during a weather forecast. My stomach flipped when I thought about asking to see the 1982 CNN video of Rhonda.





The author's sister, Rhonda. *Rockie Lyons*

It had taken 20 years to express this interest — even if it was just to myself. After the tour, I did not feel brave enough and did not want to expose my grief to my business partners.

My family did not talk about losing Rhonda. Silence was my grief language.

I still find it difficult to stare into the past, and memories grow dimmer with age. Pictures, old photos and videos help confirm some things, yet I have not found closure in my grief. I also find that most people are uncomfortable talking about it. So I write and struggle to find meaning in memories and stories that I recall of my sister, and of growing up in a mid-western family.

The last picture and memory I have of Rhonda alive is on a gurney rolling into an ambulance.

My family, meanwhile, was broken by death in unspeakable terms and ways that make it challenging to write about.

I am aware how vigilant and sensitive I am to the possibility that something can go badly. Once in a while, I imagine funerals for my immediate family and ponder the impact of loss. My rational mind often overrides the emotional when a situation becomes challenging. That's how my family operated for many years — a habit that is difficult to overcome.

I think and write about “what ifs” as a way to show loss that is often invisible to others. My sister will never experience menopause. Her “what if” children will never know their cousins who share some of the same genetics, sense of humor and short height. She will never have grey hair.

I am growing older, but Rhonda never will. I missed her help in burying our mother first, and then, 15 years later, burying our father.

Gun violence alters survivors in ways that are often unrecognized. Every time I hear about another shooting, I cringe. My heart skips a beat. Grief ambushes my ability to absorb the circumstances in which new survivors are automatically adopted into the grieving circle.

Rockie Lyons lives in Portland, Oregon and taught writing at Iowa State University, Oregon Institute of Technology and Portland State University. She just finished a memoir entitled "Over the Counter: Losing my Sister to a Mass Shooting." Her website is rockielyons.com

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