'We have the power and moral obligation to make change' – local students join March for Our Lives rally

by **VICTORIA DAVIS**

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Jack, Jay and Chloe Pardo at the March for Our Lives rally downtown. YVONNE PARDO / CONTRIBUTOR

Thousands attended the March for Our Lives rally at Waterfront Park in downtown. CHLOE PARDO / CONTRIBUTOR

With the words, "As a girl, I hope to have as many rights as a gun someday," written on a hot pink sign, which she held high above her head, Chloe Pardo marched alongside thousands of other protesters on March 24.

Chloe, a cheerleader at Mission Bay High, went with her parents and brother to support the March for Our Lives rally in downtown San Diego.

"I felt like there was a lot more than the 6,000 people they were all saying were there," Chloe said. "It must have been more like 7,000 or 8,000. It was really cool to see everybody there for the same reason and bringing their own ideas forward with the signs."

Chloe's brother Jack, a student at Pacific Beach Middle, whose sign read, "Arms are for Hugs," added, "There was just a ton of passionate people out there yelling for a change. It was awe-inspiring to see people choose to spend their Saturday morning that way."

The rally began at 10 a.m. in Waterfront Park with speeches from students both local and from out of town. People of all ages, from babies holding signs that their parents had made for them, to grandmothers proudly showing off their "Grandma's for Gun Control" posters, congregated next to the County Building.

While many politicians and local activists expressed a desire to also speak at the rally, Mohamed Elnakib, a grad student at Alliant International University, and one of the organizers who oversaw the student-led committees, explained that the goal was to highlight and elevate the voices of the younger generation.

"Many students would come up to me and say that they feel their voices don't matter, that they can't make a difference," said Elnakib. "Working on this march with the students felt great because it really showed them that there are people out there who want to listen to them, and that they can make a difference."

Gov. Jerry Brown recently signed a new law, measure AB 1407, to allow 16- and 17-year-olds, with a valid California driver's license, the ability to pre-register to vote. This will be the largest expansion of youth voter access in American history.

At the rally, registrars made the rounds to groups of 16- and 17-year-olds, asking them if they wanted to pre-register. Amazingly, one of the women Chloe's mother, Yvonne, spoke to had only been able to sign up one 16-year-old because everyone else, including Chloe, had already pre-registered months in advance.

"You would think that these 16- and 17-year-olds have nothing to say and that they're not aware but now that there's this issue that means a lot to them, and they have the pre-registration that works in their favor, they feel even more empowered," said Chloe.

"My parents have always raised me to be really observant and socially aware, and I've always tried to pass that along to my friends. Now that this movement is something that they can really sink their teeth into, it's cool to see them wanting to be more active," she said.

But for Chloe, the most impactful moment was right before the march started, where everyone was asked to make a path for the students who would be leading the protest. The crowds parted, and young activists made their way to the front of the masses. Chloe said that it was a "really moving moment."

"We wanted to give our students that platform to chant, scream, cry and grieve at the very front with all eyes on them," said Natasha Salgado, a junior at the University of San Diego, who partnered with Mohamed to organize the students. "When the crowds parted, it was like watching one generation handing the torch to the other."

Salgado explained that the moment was meant to symbolize who really has the power and the leadership in this movement. It was meant to show that the younger generations, "they got this," and it's the job of the older generations, including college students, to back them up and help their voices be heard.

"At a march or rally, it's sometimes easy to lose sight of the message behind the chanting and adrenaline rush, so seeing that image of these students was incredible because we need to realize that they don't feel safe anywhere," said Salgado. "Our students are scared of even stepping out of their home, so for them to willingly put themselves in the front of a march where anything can happen, is bravery beyond words."

Manny Martinez was one of the students from Mission Bay High who also marched among "I thought you were pro-life" and "Enough is Enough" posters. He said that the event made him feel more powerful as a person.

"This march shows everyone that we students are not working as individuals, but more as a family, wanting to protect each other from people that are willing to go to extremes (such as school shootings) and say that we want something to change."

"It's not just our civic duty," added Chloe. "We have the power and moral obligation to use our votes and our voices to make the change that we want to see. Whether you feel strongly about the gun issue or not, you should still be involved in politics and aware, no matter what your opinions are."

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