This Father's Day, One Family Is Fighting for Their Son's Memory

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Sandy Hook shooting victim Ben Wheeler's family is firing back at NBC's decision to give airtime to a prominent conspiracy theorist who claims the Wheelers are actors and that their son, Ben, never existed.

By Madeleine Deliee
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David and Francine Wheeler have gotten used to a lot: waking up to the realization that their son is still dead; losing friends who can't deal with their grief or their commitment to gun legislation reform; avoiding stares and whispers when people realize who they are but don't know what to say. They've also grown accustomed to accusations of hoax, conspiracy, and fraud. Some people maintain that the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary never happened. They say that it was a set-up, that David and Francine are actors and that their son, Ben, didn't even exist.

This Sunday, Father's Day, NBC News plans to air an interview with far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, one of the most outspoken promoters of the idea that the shooting was a hoax. David and Francine have been working actively via social media and direct communication to NBC to get the interview cancelled.

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"As the father of a child killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School, I believe it is wrong to provide Alex Jones his largest national platform ever," David tells WomansDay.com. "He and his followers have harassed me and my family personally and by name in public and private." Both he and Francine are former actors—he now works in publishing and she is a vocal coach—facts the "deniers" claim as evidence that they are perpetuating a lie. As Jones's fans continue to plaster the internet with their allegations, the Wheelers' friends and family are calling, emailing, petitioning—whatever they can do to prevent this story from gaining any further legitimacy.

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The Wheeler family in 2012.

Courtesy of the Wheelers

Megyn Kelly, who interviewed Jones ahead of the broadcast, was slated to host a gala for Sandy Hook Promise, one of the advocacy groups that grew out of the tragedy, last Wednesday but SHP withdrew its invitation following the announcement of the broadcast. "Sandy Hook Promise cannot support the decision by Megyn or NBC to give any form of voice or platform to Alex Jones," Nicole Hockley, another parent who lost a child in the shooting, as well as co-founder and managing director of SHP, said in a statement.

David Wheeler calls the interview "morally irresponsible" and doubts the intentions of the program. "Kelly stated that her purpose was to shine a light, but I don't believe the format of her program allows for the necessary exploration," he says. "These delusional opinions are, in themselves, not worthy of attention. What leads a person to hold these opinions, however, is worth discussing and understanding."



A poster of Ben Wheeler, the six year old victim of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, outside Trinity Church at his funeral on December 20, 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut

Francine agrees, although she's reluctant to even give Jones this much attention. "I rarely talk about him," she says. "I don't give him anything. I can't focus on that. If I focused on the 'no' instead of the 'yes,' I don't think I'd have any hope."

> "There are dozens of YouTube videos that make insane claims about me and my family and what happened to us that day."

Instead, following the deaths of Ben and the 25 others at Sandy Hook, many within the Newtown community founded organizations to memorialize those lost: Ben's Lighthouse, which the Wheelers helped to launch, is one of these. Its mission is to improve communities for children and encourage growth through volunteer service across the country. In addition to local efforts to help heal their own area, they have sent groups of volunteers, mostly teenagers,

to give back by rebuilding in Colorado and Oklahoma following the trauma of natural disasters. In the future, they hope to continue to expand their work. "I'm hoping we can be a template for other communities that have experienced trauma, especially for youth," Francine says. "I wish we'd had that for our youth."

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David and Francine explain that their nonprofit came from the desire to use their grief for good. "Ben's Lighthouse lets us feel joy and hope," Francine says. "You can't get rid of trauma, but you can help other people with their trauma and do so in your child's memory."



A memorial for the Sandy Hook School shooting victims near Sandy Hook Firehouse.
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"One of the immediate human reactions to grief and loss, especially traumatic, violent loss, is to try to make the world into the place you want to live," David says. "Working to help others and possibly change any aspect of the complicated societal puzzle pieces that led to the death of Ben and his classmates and teachers is deeply satisfying and helpful."

Some of the other memorial organizations are also committed to research or outreach to prevent future violence. The Avielle Foundation, named for 6-year-old shooting victim Avielle Rose Richman, for example, focuses on prevention through brain research and community education. "All of the nonprofits that arose out of our tragedy are working toward that in one way or another," David says.

Though the Wheelers' loss has been unimaginable, they take strength in each other and their family. Their older son, Nate, starts high school next year; their younger son, Matt, was born in 2014 and bears the middle name Bennett in honor of the brother he never met. David and Francine insistence on keeping Ben's presence close to them. They speak of him frequently and with love. Francine sees this commitment, too, in Nate, in his own dedication to

community service. As president of his student council, he recently gave a speech about its importance. "He's starting to understand the value, as a survivor who has to forever deal with that," Francine says. "What can I do in Ben's name?"

The 6-year-old son they lost is very much a part of their daily lives. "I feel closest to Ben when I'm out in the world—in nature, specifically. The places of natural contemplation bring him close to me," David says. "We're lucky to live in a time when we can carry our videos in our pockets, too. If I need to hear his voice or see his silly antics, it's right here in my hand."

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The power of video is two-sided: It gives David a way to keep his son near, but it also gives a forum to a voice that disavows the pain and suffering the Wheelers and the Newtown community have endured over the last several years. Even more disturbing to the Wheelers is the fact that shock jock Jones is "reaping great profit" promoting a disavowal that may not even come from genuine belief. Jones's own lawyer has said that his on-air persona is "a character" and compared his speech to that of "a performance artist." If this is the case, the cynicism of provoking pain for profit leads David to describe Jones as "a despicable con man" who has fanned ongoing demonstrations of "insensitivity, lack of empathy, and clear hostility" toward the Wheelers and others.

"A quick search of my name on YouTube brings up dozens, if not more, videos that make insane claims about me and my family and what happened to us that day," says David. "Sadly, many people get their news from YouTube. None of these videos have a shred of integrity, but that doesn't solve the problem or address the real reason why people express these opinions." His anger toward Jones, in fact, does not immediately extend to his followers. He sees them as disenfranchised and disillusioned. "It's not about me personally," he says. Instead, he sees their anger directed toward "a world they don't think listens to or cares about them at all."

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When asked what he would say to those who deny the events of December 14, 2012 and the lives lost that day, David says, "I would ask them about their relationships, about the people they love and what their daily lives are like." Perhaps this would allow them to see the human connection between themselves and those whose pain they refuse to acknowledge, he reasons.

On Sunday, the Wheelers will celebrate their fifth Father's Day without their second son. They hope that NBC rethinks the decision to air Megyn Kelly's interview with Jones, but regardless, they're committed to moving forward with what they know is most important: honoring Ben's memory daily and doing everything they can to prevent other families from experiencing the same tragedy.

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