

DEEP READS

# Guilty: Inside the high-risk, historic prosecution of a school shooter's parents

A Post reporter embedded with Michigan prosecutors as they pursued homicide charges against Jennifer and James Crumbley, whose son killed four students at Oxford High.



Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald charged Jennifer and James Crumbley with involuntary manslaughter after their 15-year-old son killed four students at Oxford High in 2021.

Story by [John Woodrow Cox](#)

Photos by [Joshua Lott](#)

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PONTIAC, Mich.

**I**t was just past 8 on the night before her closing argument when the prosecutor slipped out of her team's war room and headed down the hallway to a closet packed with cardboard bins and paper bags, all of them sealed in red tape imprinted with the word "EVIDENCE." She pulled on a pair of mint green latex gloves and eyed a small, white box. "Oxford High School" was written in blue ink on the top, and below that, a series of details described what was inside — "Item No.: 1." "Description of Item: One 9mm." "Offense: Homicide."

Karen McDonald, Oakland County's elected prosecutor, opened the box and picked up a Sig Sauer handgun that had ended four teenagers' lives in 2021 and consumed her own ever since.

Stored all around her were remnants of that day. There was the journal in which Ethan Crumbley, then 15, wrote that his parents had ignored his pleas for help and that he was so distraught he would "SHOOT UP THE FUKING SCHOOL" and, days later, that he would do it using the gun they'd just bought him as a gift. There were the 32 empty casings from rounds he'd fired down hallways and into classrooms. There was 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana's black backpack, stained with blood and stuffed with headphones, Skittles and a biology notebook pocked with a bullet hole. And then there was the purse that once held four new cellphones and \$6,617 in cash that Ethan's parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, had with them when police found the couple hiding in an industrial building four days after the shooting.

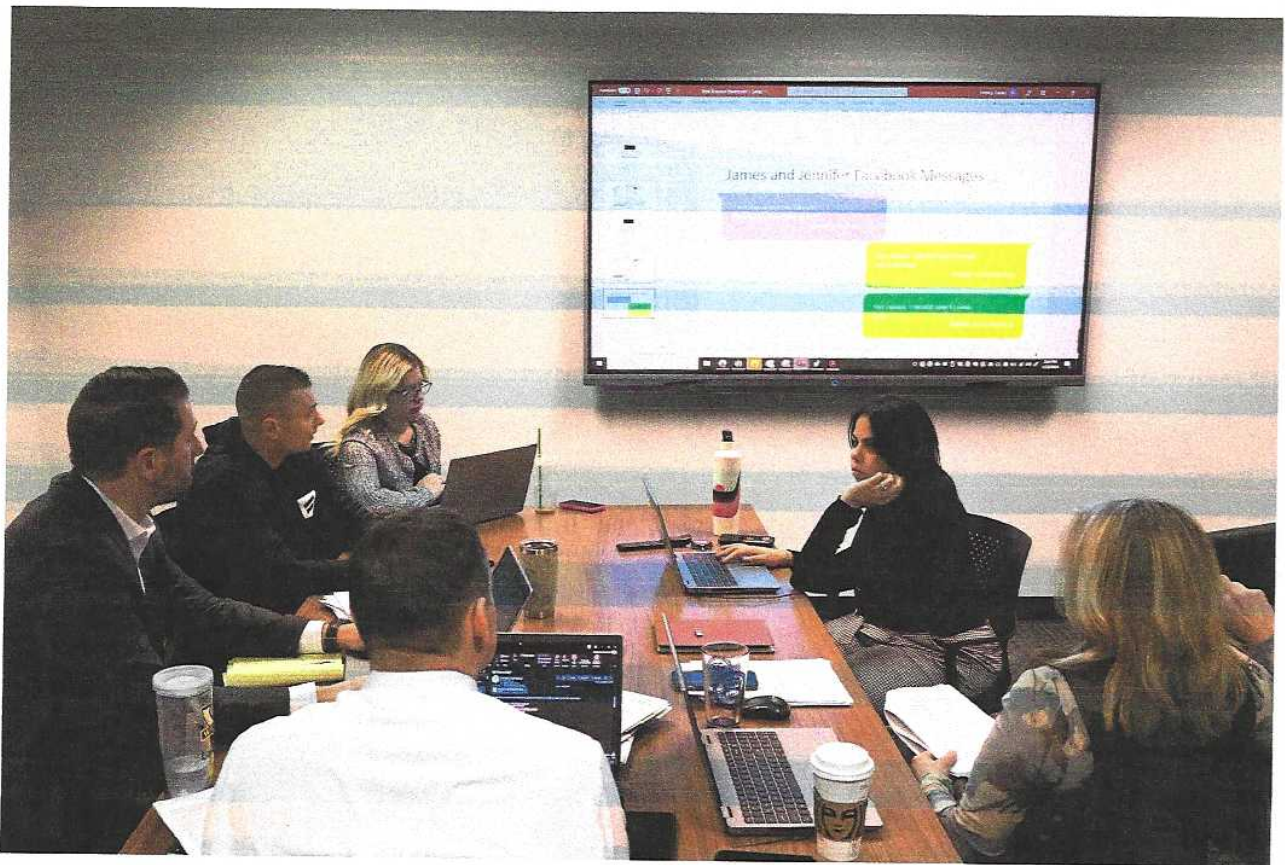
Now McDonald, 53, gripped the black pistol in her right hand, and in her left, a 14-inch steel cable affixed to a lock. The safety device was identical to one the Crumbleys owned but, investigators alleged, never used. With her sleeves rolled up, McDonald threaded the cable into the empty magazine well and through an open port at the gun's top, then she curled the tip back down and clicked it into the lock, turning the key. McDonald looked up, stunned by how easy it was to do.

“It’s 10 seconds,” she said to herself.

She returned to the war room, where the rest of her team was prepping for the final stretch of James Crumbley’s involuntary manslaughter trial. They watched as she demonstrated a second time, then a third. She stared down at the gun, the lock still on it.

“That’s all it would have taken,” she said, shaking her head. “And we’re here. And four kids have died.”

They were there that night in March because McDonald had chosen to do what no prosecutor in the United States had ever done before: charge the parents of a school shooter with homicide.



ATF Special Agent Brett Brandon, second from left, in a dark sweatshirt, prepares for his testimony with the prosecution team.

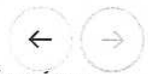
It was a decision celebrated by those desperate for a new approach to address gun violence and criticized by some legal experts who called it prosecutorial

overreach. The Crumbleys, whose attorneys declined comment for this story on their behalf, maintained they'd done nothing wrong and shouldn't be held responsible for their son's actions. Many people agreed with them. Even inside her own office, some of McDonald's most experienced attorneys opposed what she was doing, dubious that she could win convictions in prosecutions that would cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars.

She did win, though, at a pair of nationally televised trials that set new legal precedent not just in Michigan, but also across the country. To make history, McDonald endured death threats, a judge-imposed gag order and unrelenting public scrutiny and skepticism. Over the course of more than two years, The Washington Post embedded behind the scenes with the prosecutors, attending their strategy sessions, witnessing their obsessive research on potential jurors and arguments over high-risk witnesses, watching their chaotic scramble before one of the case's most critical moments and their agonizing wait for a verdict they'd feared had been lost.

### How this story was reported

Cox spent months with prosecutors and investigators while they gathered hundreds of pieces of evidence against the Crumbleys, whose son killed four schoolmates at Oxford High. He watched them meet with some witnesses and make crucial decisions about how to prosecute the couple. He attended more than two dozen strategy meetings, read through hundreds of pages of documents and text messages and later embedded with the prosecution team for the entirety of both parents' trials. He was occasionally excluded from sensitive legal discussions and witness preparation sessions.



The debate over the cable lock began days earlier as McDonald was fashioning questions for one of the prosecution's key witnesses, a special agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. After a long day in court, McDonald, a Democrat suddenly being mentioned as a future candidate for governor, had swapped her deep purple jacket and skirt for a pink sweater and dark blue jeans. Around the windowless, fifth-floor conference room, ties were loosened, jackets shed. The team — nine attorneys, two investigators and two paralegals — had prepared for months, first to try Jennifer Crumbley and now

her husband, James. Half-empty Coke cans perched on tables beside bowls of Starburst, essential lines of defense against the creeping exhaustion.

“You could end with how easy it is to put a cable lock on,” the ATF agent, Brett Brandon, suggested for the conclusion of his testimony. “I’ll just take the cable lock and put it on the murder weapon.”

“The baller move would be for you to do that during closing,” another attorney interjected, glancing at McDonald.

“Oh yeah, if we could teach you how to do it, that would be badass,” Brandon said, letting slip an “if” that was not lost on McDonald, who rolled her eyes amid scattered laughter.

“I’m *pretty sure* you could teach me how to do it,” she said.

“It is harder to do under stress, is all I’m saying,” Brandon added, because in no moment would she have to withstand more pressure than during the closing argument, broadcast live, with a verdict in the balance.



Brandon handles the Sig Sauer 9mm handgun used in the 2021 shooting at Oxford High.

“I heard you can’t do it,” assistant prosecutor Marc Keast taunted, grinning. The seasoned litigator, serving as McDonald’s co-counsel, had seen his boss face doubt over and over, then make use of it.

It was a pattern that had defined much of her life.

Even after demonstrating that she could lock the gun, the team was divided. “A terrible idea,” was how one attorney privately described it to Keast. If she mishandled the murder weapon or fumbled the lock in her final and most important address, the mistake could plant uncertainty in a juror’s mind.

The next morning, McDonald still didn’t know whether she would go through with it. She understood her staff’s trepidation. Not until she was alone in her office, just minutes before closings were scheduled to begin, did McDonald make the call. She tidied her wavy, wheat blond hair, slipped on her black Chanel pumps and matching blazer. She packed her three-ring binder.

Then she tucked the cable lock into her bag and headed to court.

## ‘What about the parents?’



A memorial for victims at Oxford High in 2021, one week after four students were killed. (Emily Elconin/Getty Images)

**T**he prosecutor was alone, and she knew it.

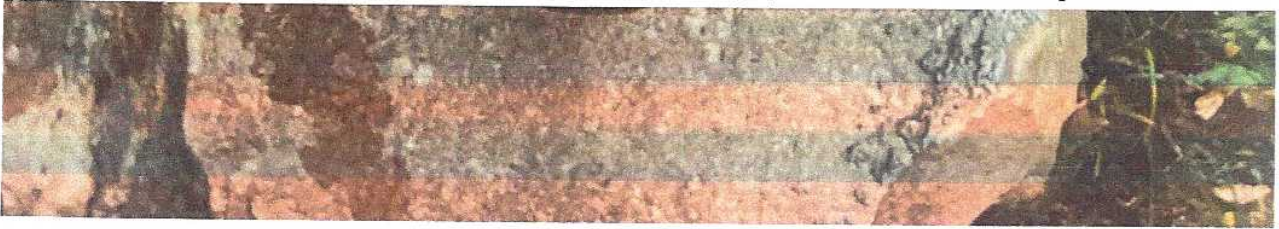
It had been 22 hours since the Crumbleys' son fired the first round at Oxford High on Nov. 30, 2021, and the legal response to the deadliest school shooting in Michigan history fell to McDonald, who was just 11 months into her job. She had worked since the late 1990s in both public and private practice, but this was unlike anything she'd dealt with before.

She and her staff listened to investigators from the sheriff's office describe their evidence against Ethan Crumbley. He hadn't tried to escape after firing rounds

into 11 people, carefully unloading the gun before surrendering to police. His guilt was not in doubt.

McDonald, who has two children and three stepchildren, would charge the 10th-grader as an adult. With her decision made, the easy thing to do — the thing that prosecutors across the country had been doing for decades — was to leave it at that. But McDonald couldn't let herself do the easy thing. She almost never did.

Entering her last year of law school at Wayne State University, she got pregnant, gave birth to a daughter and still made a 4.0 in her final term, finishing among the top 20 percent in her graduating class. In her first job as a litigator, inside the same office McDonald would later run, she prosecuted sex crimes against children and, as she recalled, did not lose a single case over five years. In her 30s, amid the collapse of her first marriage, she took up marathons, completing New York and Chicago. At 42, she became a judge but eventually abandoned the job, one of the most prestigious in the legal profession, to run for prosecutor, one of the most punishing. She faced an incumbent whom political insiders insisted she could not beat. She did, by nearly a 2-to-1 margin.



Karen McDonald with her daughter, Maeve Stargardt, left, and son, Ian Stargardt, around 2003. (Family photo)

Now, again, McDonald was headed for the hard path. She would investigate the Crumbleys.

Between the Columbine High shooting in 1999 and the one at Oxford 22 years later, children committed at least 175 school shootings, according to a [Washington Post database](#) that tracks gun violence on K-12 campuses. Among the 114 cases in which the weapon's source was identified by police, 77 percent were taken from the child's home or those of relatives or friends. And yet, just five times were the adult owners of the weapons convicted of any crime because they failed to lock them up.

At the time, Michigan didn't have a law requiring safe storage of firearms, making any prosecution of the Crumbleys more challenging. McDonald, though, learned that Jennifer Crumbley had taken her son to a gun range three days before the shooting, describing the weapon on Instagram as "his new Xmas present." She also discovered that, on the morning of the shooting, the couple had been called to campus after the teen drew a picture of a person shot dead, along with "Blood everywhere" and "The thoughts won't stop. Help me." The Crumbleys saw it but declined to take him home, blaming work demands. Jennifer returned to her marketing job at a real estate company. James, a DoorDash driver, began making deliveries.

A still image from a video showing Jennifer Crumbley with a case containing her son's 9mm as they left a gun range three days before the shooting at Oxford High. (Oakland County Prosecutor's Office)

As a mother, McDonald found their behavior unconscionable and, as a prosecutor, she felt certain it was criminal. When that initial meeting in the conference room neared its end, she posed a question to the group: “What about the parents?”

“No,” snapped a veteran attorney.

McDonald, who seldom overlooked a slight, bristled at his dismissiveness but didn't challenge him. Afterward, in the hallway, she pulled aside Detective Lt. Tim Willis, assigned by the sheriff's office to lead their investigation. She asked him what he thought of charging the Crumbleys.

“Absolutely not,” he told her.

An ardent conservative, Willis distrusted McDonald, who'd run for office on a progressive platform promising criminal justice reform. He was also exhausted, having spent the night managing the most gruesome crime scene of his 25-year career.



From left, Oakland County assistant prosecutors Marc Keast, Rob VanWert and Cindy Brown talk with Karen McDonald, right, as they prepare in the days before Jennifer Crumbley's trial.

Keast, the assistant prosecutor, soon cornered McDonald to ask for the case against Ethan Crumbley.

“It’s yours,” McDonald said. “Now let’s talk about the parents.”

Keast, too, had reservations, wondering if they had enough evidence. “What about the phones?” she asked, because detectives had taken the couple’s devices hours after the shooting.

The next morning, Keast drove to the sheriff’s office to review the Crumbleys’ text messages, though he had been warned they were unremarkable. Basically nothing, an evidence analyst said. Keast asked to see them anyway, starting with the final message between Jennifer and her son.

“Ethan,” she’d written, “don’t do it.”

Keast was shocked, a feeling that only grew over the next two hours as he reviewed more exchanges he thought were incriminating. The day before the shooting, a teacher spotted the teen researching bullets in class. When the school reported it to his mother, she treated it as a joke.

He called McDonald on his way back to the office.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Keast told her.

Just past noon on Dec. 2, 2021, McDonald met with her office’s most senior attorneys. Among them was John Skrzynski, “the godfather” of Michigan prosecutors who’d convicted Jack Kevorkian, the pioneer of physician-assisted suicide known as “Dr. Death.” Skrzynski had just turned 70 and needed a new hip, but he remained imposing. McDonald knew he didn’t believe she should charge the parents, but he wasn’t her only detractor. Other attorneys also questioned whether the Crumbleys’ actions fit the definition of “gross negligence” that Michigan law required to convict someone of involuntary manslaughter.

McDonald, who felt uneasy when she couldn’t build consensus, took a seat, an American flag hanging behind her. She scanned the faces looking back. Some, maybe all, disagreed with her. The legal system was built on precedent, and for what she intended to do, none existed. But it was her name on the wall. If there was public backlash, if a judge dismissed the charges, she would bear the consequences.

Be honest, McDonald told her staff. Give me your opinion. But know this: “We’re charging the parents.”



### Prosecutor announces charges

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On Dec. 3, 2021, Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald announced charges against Ethan Crumbley's parents. (Reuters)

McDonald immediately became an object of admiration to Americans fed up with gun violence, but something else happened, too. Within hours of the news conference where she announced her decision, threats of rape and murder began to arrive on her social media, her email, her cellphone.

Soon, armed security was stationed outside her home, every hour of every day. A former police officer started driving her to and from the office. She no longer went to the grocery store alone. She regretted that her front door was made of glass. It was too easy to see through — to shoot through. She stopped passing in front of it.

## ‘Kick out the freaks’



McDonald practices for jury selection a few days before Jennifer Crumbley's trial.

**T**he potential juror in seat No. 2, a blond, bespectacled woman who said she had three kids and a handgun, did not like Karen McDonald, and she wanted her to know it.

“I’ve seen a lot on Fox News about this case. I’ve also seen you on the news quite a few times,” the woman said. “I don’t agree with a lot of your past work you’ve done.”

“I’m glad you brought that up,” McDonald replied, subdued, as she stood in front of the panel and flipped through the pages of a legal pad. “A lot of people agree with the decisions I made as a judge and as the elected prosecutor, and some don’t. ... I understand it. And that’s what I signed up for.”

McDonald knew how critical it was that she remain measured in court, though, on this day, she wasn’t in court, none of the 10 people sitting in front of her had

been called to fulfill a civic duty, and her golden retriever, Birdie, was sprawled at her feet. In the chairs sat prosecutors, paralegals and a couple spouses, among them McDonald's husband. They'd assembled the Saturday before Jennifer Crumbley's January trial for mock voir dire, each of them embodying a real person from the jury pool, including a couple who despised McDonald's politics.

She had wanted Keast to lead voir dire, but a jury consultant urged her to do it.

In hearings and legal filings leading up to the trial, Jennifer Crumbley's defense attorney, Shannon Smith, had targeted McDonald. Smith — best known for representing Larry Nassar, the sports doctor convicted of sexually abusing elite female gymnasts — framed the case not as the People v. the Crumbleys but instead as a politically ambitious, ideological prosecutor versus a pair of well-meaning parents.



### Defense delivers opening statement

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Defense attorney Shannon Smith delivered her opening statement on Jan. 25, 2024. (The Washington Post)

If potential jurors brought a bias against McDonald with them, she needed to undo it or, at least, expose it.

“So it has to be me,” she realized.

She had to do more than just make strangers feel comfortable enough to reveal their prejudices. She needed to appear committed but not controlling, smart but not condescending. She needed to find out, with no air of judgment, if they owned guns. Above all, she needed to be likable, an obligation that, as a woman, she had navigated her entire career.

From the moment McDonald filed the charges, the depth of her involvement was a source of tension, even within her own office. She led an operation of 200 people, and made complex legal decisions every day, but McDonald hadn't tried a criminal case herself since convicting a man of sexually assaulting an 11-year-old neighbor. That was two decades before the Crumbleys' arrest.

"It's going to be a huge pain in the ass for me," Keast, 43, concluded after McDonald decided to serve as his co-counsel. Only when she began to cite obscure bits of evidence did the assistant prosecutor recognize how committed she was.

McDonald didn't resent his suspicion. She had felt underestimated since childhood.

Growing up in a central Michigan town of 4,000, McDonald didn't excel in school. Her parents sometimes called her stupid, often yelling at their three girls and pitting them against one another, she and her older sister said. McDonald, a cheerleader, was labeled the cute, popular daughter but never the smart one. Her dad once suggested she become a travel agent, helping fashion the chip that would never leave her shoulder. When she decided to attend Alma College, a small liberal arts school, her parents made her sign a contract agreeing that if she didn't do well, she would have to pay them back.

Her father, Bob McDonald, an 85-year-old Army vet who worked in construction, acknowledged how hard he and his late wife had been on their kids, particularly Karen, the strongest willed of the three.

"I was the rule follower," said Karen's twin sister, Kristen McDonald Rivet, a

state senator running for Congress. “She was absolutely not the rule follower.”

Their dad, who now sends his friends news articles about Karen’s achievements, said he regrets being so harsh but can see the best parts of himself in her. He, too, was a risk-taker, riding bulls as a teen and later skydiving, completing more than 300 jumps. And, like him, she became someone who cannot be outworked, a cornerstone of her success.



McDonald, around late 1999, after first becoming an assistant prosecutor in the same office she runs now.  
(Family photo)

As a young prosecutor, she bugged colleagues to give her their misdemeanor jury trials because she wanted to be assigned more felonies.

“McDonald, you’ve always got something to prove, don’t you?” she recalled her boss asking one day.

“I do,” she replied.

With her drive came exacting standards, which McDonald brought into office as Oakland County prosecutor.

Seldom was that more apparent than in the days before choosing a jury for Jennifer Crumbley’s trial. Because of the case’s high profile, the circuit court called in more than 600 people to potentially serve, and McDonald’s team researched every one of them, poring through social media pages and public records.

In a staff meeting, she asked if they had created a checklist to guarantee nothing was missed. When no one gave a clear answer, McDonald grew annoyed.

“I would like a protocol that everyone’s used and ensure that, on each of those jurors, all of these 10 things have been done.”

A minute later, she mentioned it once more.

“Like, I just want it *written*,” McDonald said. “I thought this was done a while ago.”

Selecting the right jury, she reiterated, was more important than any argument or witness preparation. A single oversight could lead to a juror who would refuse to convict Jennifer Crumbley.

The team spent days entering names into a spreadsheet, creating a code of emojis to identify key qualities (teacher, married with kids, gun owner) and keeping detailed notes both on the desirable fits (“33, married, 2 year old child.



'cause they just want to throw a wrench in it.”

It would take two days to seat their jury, and among them was a college-educated professional who had joined late, after another candidate's dismissal. He didn't own any guns or have any kids. Though their research revealed little else about him, he sounded reasonable during questioning. The team had reservations, but with every strike, they risked adding a random replacement who was worse. Reluctantly, McDonald and Keast kept the man, and into the jury box he brought the wrench they'd worked so hard to avoid.

## 'Just get a different job'



Keast, who often dreamt about the case, checks his phone in a hallway outside the courtroom.

n the most important day of his career, Marc Keast woke up at 5 a.m., between sheets covered in cartoon sharks. He'd spent the night in the twin bed of his 8-

**O** year-old son, who had fallen asleep next to his mom hours before Keast returned home from work.

He stepped past the stuffed rainbow trout on the floor and down the darkened hallway to check on his older son, Liam, who is 12. In four hours, Keast would deliver the opening statement in Jennifer Crumbley's trial, but as he peeked through the door, the nerves hadn't set in yet. Instead, what he felt was gratitude, because his son's bedroom was not empty, and guilt, because the parents of four other children couldn't say the same that morning.

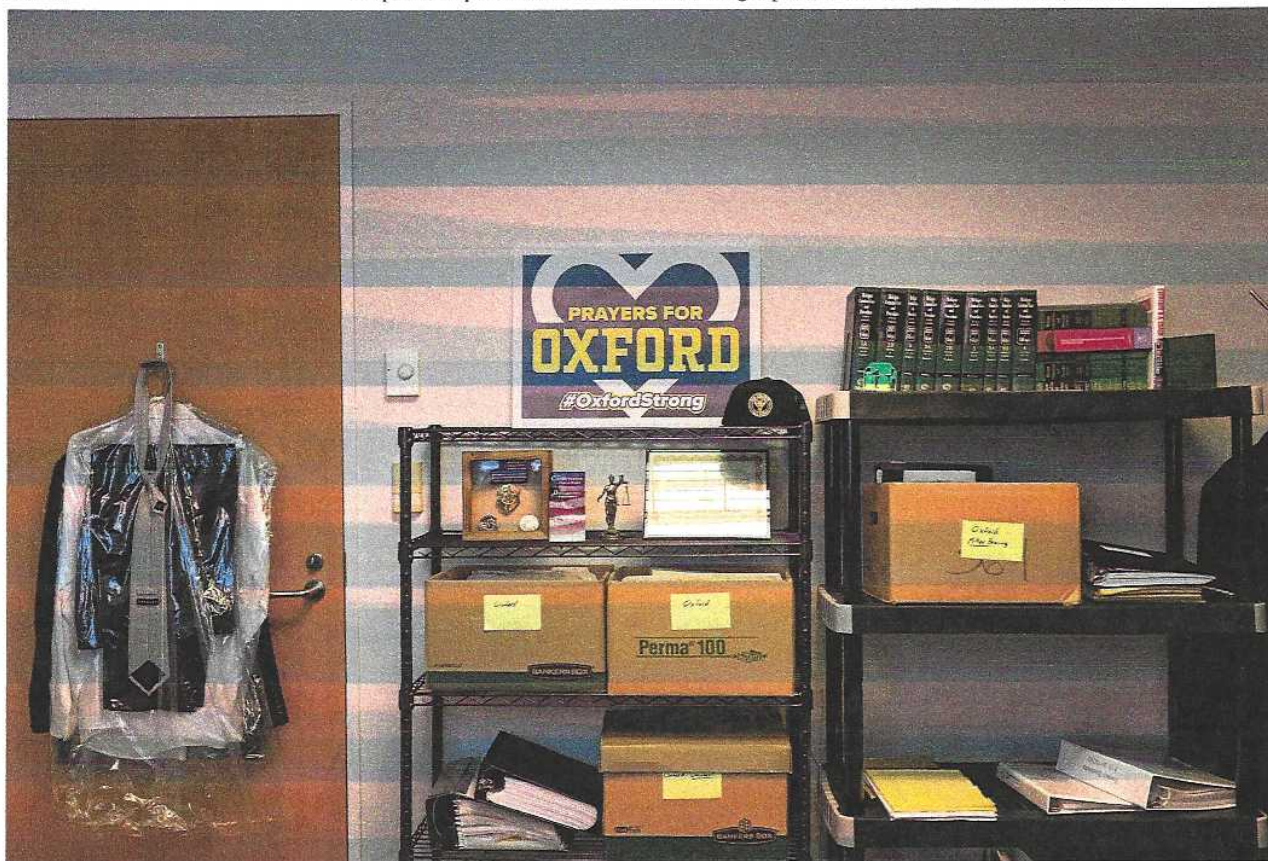
Keast dreamed about the case every night. Once, he relived the shooter's entire sentencing hearing. There, in his mind, was Buck Myre, 16-year-old Tate's dad, trembling with rage. There, too, was Craig Shilling, admitting that he still caught himself waiting up for his 17-year-old son, Justin, to get home from work.

Now, with Keast's sons still asleep, he kissed his wife, Natalie, and headed out into the pre-dawn darkness, trudging through snow and past a yard sign that read, "EVERYONE WELCOME."

It was Jan. 25, and he hadn't taken a day off since Christmas. The team had organized 400 exhibits and collected more than five terabytes of evidence, a data store roughly equivalent to 2,500 hours of high-definition video. The trial's hold on his mind was so complete that one morning he forgot how to thread his tie into a half-Windsor knot, which he had done nearly every workday for 16 years.

Even when he was home, his mind wasn't, and his kids noticed. Natalie tried helping him explain it to the boys: Dad has a big job to do, because people need his help, so he won't be around much for a while.

"Can't you just get a different job?" his younger son, Henry, asked one day, and Keast willed himself not to tear up.



Case files and an Oxford High memorial sign in Keast's office.

When the boy started having nightmares, Natalie let him sleep beside her on the evenings Keast worked late.

“There is some irony to it,” Keast said on the drive to court, the sun still an hour from rising. “A case about severe parental neglect, and I’m not there for my kids.”

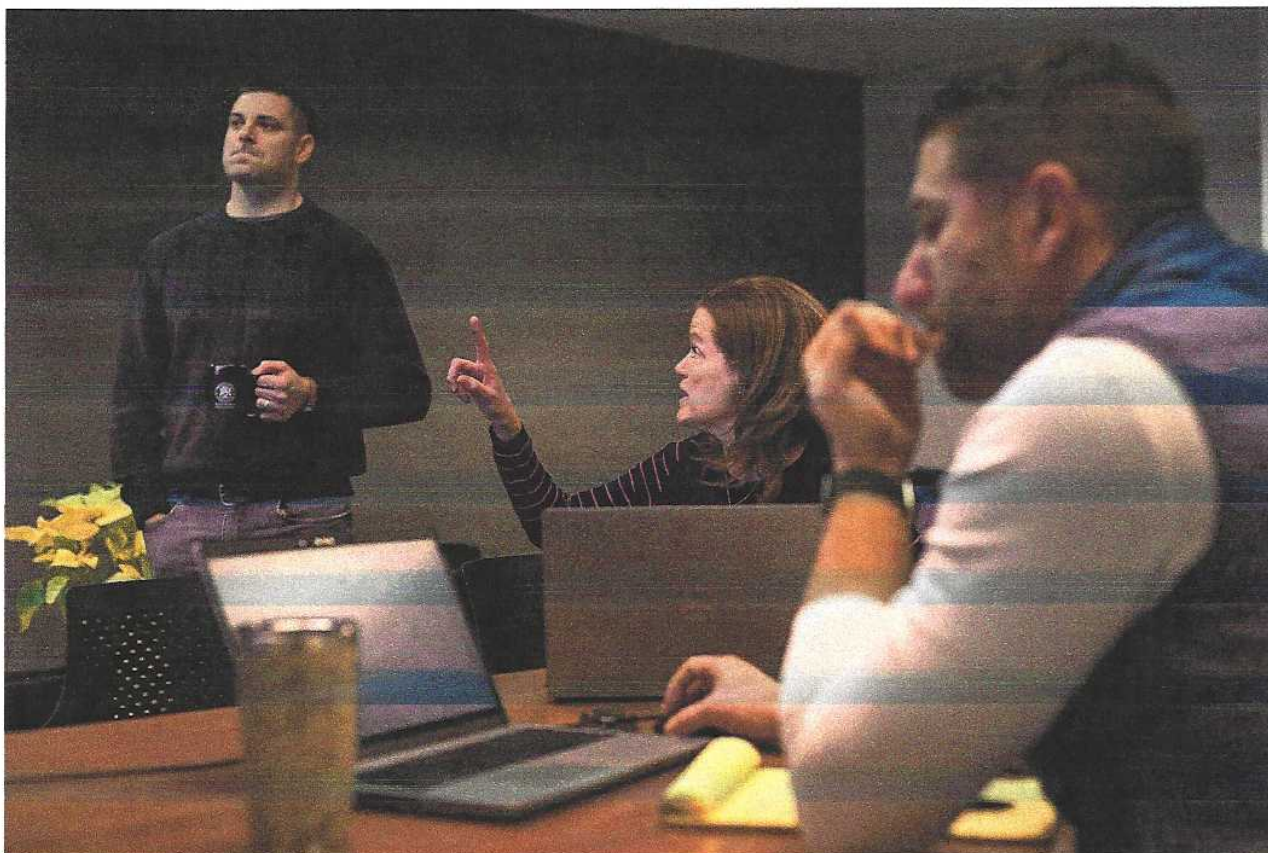
He hoped his children would eventually understand. A former college discus thrower, he reveled in the rush of winning a big case, but it was the victims who kept him in the job. He’d ignored overtures from private firms that could triple his salary, enough to upgrade from his Kohl’s suits and 2018 Jeep SUV, with its broken door and missing gas cap cover.

He was used to doing without.

Keast grew up in the shadows of chemical plants in Michigan’s Downriver, a working-class community south of Detroit. His mom was a teacher, and his dad

helped run the family's rivet factory. Until high school, Keast suffered from a debilitating speech impediment. He couldn't pronounce Rs, which meant he couldn't say his own first name.

In class, he kept his hand down, mouth shut. On the playground, other students mocked him, until he made them stop, sometimes with his fists. The experience was formative, teaching him what it felt like to suffer because of someone else's cruelty — and what it felt like to do something about it. He grasped the concept of justice before he knew what the word meant.



Keast, Brown and VanWert discuss potential jurors before Jennifer Crumbley's trial.

On the morning he pulled up to the courthouse to give his opening statement against Jennifer Crumbley, Keast had already delivered more than 100 of them, learning that authenticity mattered most. He was the guy from Downriver, with a crew cut, gap-toothed smile and, on this day, a navy blue suit he'd bought three years earlier for 70 percent off at Macy's.

There were still words he wouldn't risk saying — recognizance, bestowed — but he didn't need them. Keast thought of opening statements as if they were conversations with his dad, over a beer.

“Murder, it's an intentional killing. Involuntary manslaughter, by definition, is unintentional. It's rooted in negligence,” he would tell this jury.

“We're not here to talk about good parenting or bad parenting. It's not illegal to be a bad parent,” he would say after that.

“Even though she didn't pull the trigger on November 30th, she's responsible for those deaths,” he would say after that.

Keast parked and headed upstairs, where he was the first to arrive. He took off his jacket, poured himself a cup of coffee. Keast didn't need to review the statement anymore, because he had committed nearly every word to memory.

He'd started writing it a week after the shooting.

## **‘Stand up and object’**



McDonald and members of her team walk through the courthouse hallway. They were not allowed to discuss the case publicly for months.

**K**east pressed a hand against his forehead and closed his eyes, each ringed with dark circles. His sleeves were rolled up, his gray tie undone. It had been five days and 11 hours since the opening statements, and the prosecutor's meticulously planned address had gotten far less attention than defense attorney Shannon Smith's, which began with a misquoted line from a Taylor Swift song: "Band-Aids don't stop bullet holes."

Fourteen witnesses had followed, but Keast worried about what Smith, who declined to be interviewed for this story, would do with the 19th on their list.

"I don't think we should call him," he said into the phone on the table in front of him.

“Why?” asked McDonald, who was working from home.

The debate had gone on for months. Brian Meloche, their most unpredictable witness, was scheduled to testify the next day, and they still hadn’t decided whether he should. McDonald had long opposed calling him before reconsidering.

Jennifer Crumbley and Meloche, a firefighter, had been having an affair, regularly rendezvousing in a Costco parking lot. On the morning of the shooting, Crumbley told him about the meeting at the school and said she worried her son would do “something dumb,” Meloche later alleged. When he asked her where the gun was, he said she told him it was in her car.

Keast questioned whether the claims were compelling enough to accept the risks. Meloche had a lousy memory and, to Keast, several of his Facebook exchanges with Crumbley, detailing her pain and explanations, could invite sympathy.

A different message worried McDonald. The day after the shooting, Crumbley told Meloche the gun was secured with a “string lock,” a claim she and her husband never made to police. If the prosecution didn’t show that message to the jury, McDonald was convinced Smith would.

“It will look like we’re trying to hide it,” McDonald said. “We’re fine with it. We embrace it, because we think it’s bullshit.”

They felt confident about their case to that point, comforted that even the Oxford High counselor and dean of students, who both failed to recognize the danger Ethan Crumbley posed, fared better than expected.

“An attorney like Shannon can feed on a witness like Brian Meloche,” Keast told McDonald on the phone. “And we’ve given her nothing to eat yet.”

Still conflicted the next morning, McDonald asked VanWert and Skrzynski, their office’s most experienced litigator, to question Meloche, a gaunt, bald-headed

man who wore cowboy boots to court. They did, acknowledging Meloche was flawed but concluding he could take the stand if the prosecutors needed him.



Shannon Smith, attorney for Jennifer Crumbley, cross-examines firefighter Brian Meloche during one of the trial's most contentious moments.

In a series of rapid questions — each ending with “correct?” — Smith overwhelmed Meloche, leading him to agree that investigators gave him information against Jennifer Crumbley and implied he could lose his job if he helped her.

Smith also revealed the affair, evidence she had previously persuaded the judge to rule inadmissible and which prosecutors weren’t allowed to bring up. Meloche never recovered, hollow-eyed and stammering as he concurred with nearly anything Smith suggested.

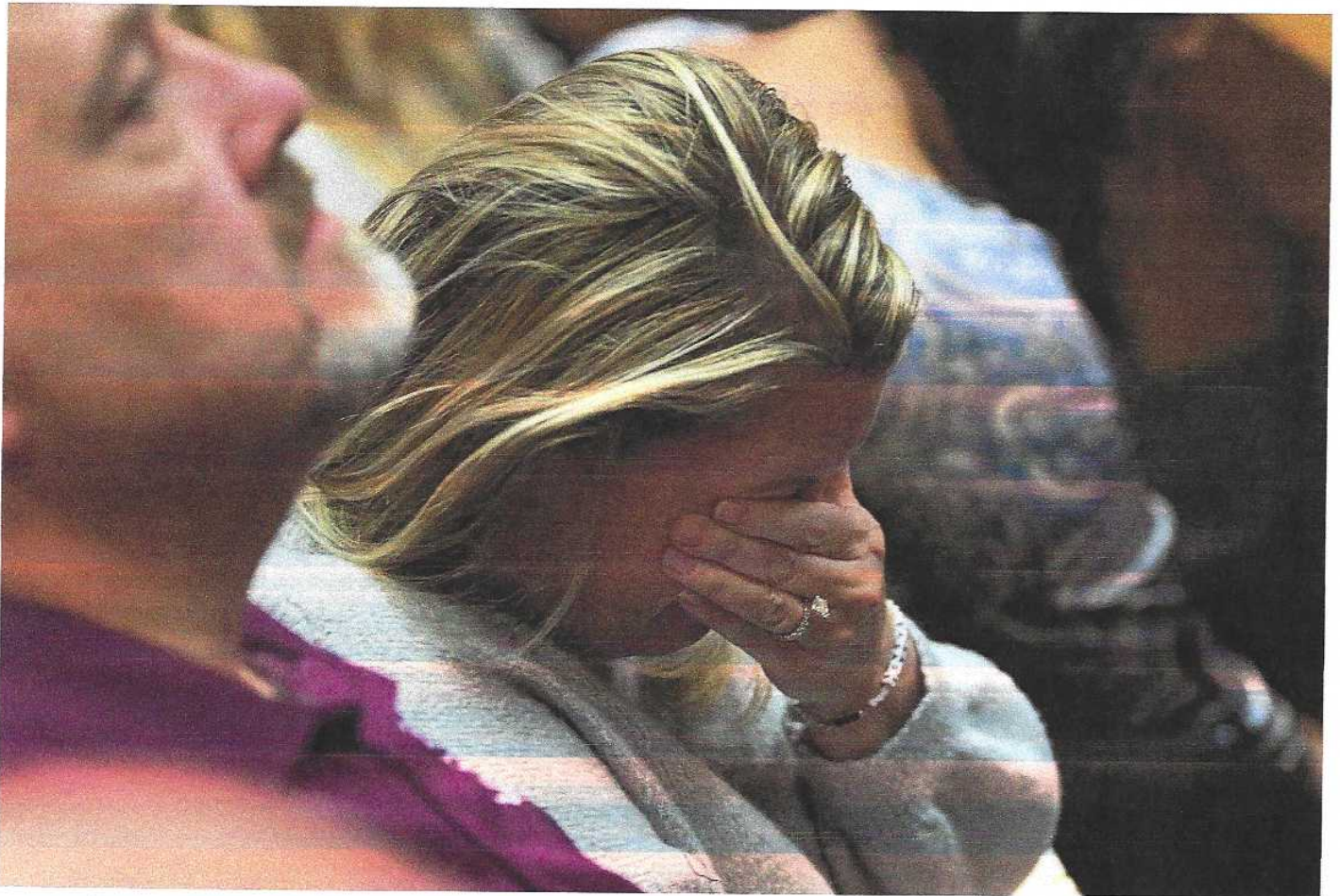
“Stand up and object,” McDonald whispered to Keast at one point. “Right now.”

“To what?” he responded.

McDonald realized that the defense attorney wasn't naming any of the officers she'd accused of coercion, so Keast did object — and kept objecting. He also tried to blunt the damage in his final round of questions, confirming that the core of Meloche's testimony had never changed and that no one threatened to interfere with his job.

"He was a nightmare," McDonald would say later, acknowledging a strategic mistake that only ratcheted up the pressure on the prosecution's final witness, Tim Willis, the sheriff's lieutenant who had opposed charging the parents.

## 'She lost hope'



Steve St. Juliana, left, and Nicole Beausoleil both lost daughters in the shooting at Oxford High and attended the trials.

**W**illis and McDonald both recognized the irony that her case could hinge on him. Their politics remained at odds, but he had long ago changed his mind about the charges and the woman behind them. He made her laugh in a way that no one else did, and she helped him face his trauma — which he refused to call “trauma” — in a way that no one else could. McDonald taught him combat breathing techniques to manage stress and bugged him to see a counselor.

Therapy, she told him, helped her navigate the chasm she’d dug between the feelings she allowed people to see and the ones she actually experienced. She knew that Willis, who as a kid lost an uncle and two cousins to gun violence, had immersed in the horror at Oxford High, managing the scene for more than 16 uninterrupted hours.

Just the sight of 17-year-old Madisyn Baldwin’s mom, Nicole Beausoleil, who’d been in court every day, made him well up.

“It’s her face,” he would say. “You can see she lost hope.”



### Investigator becomes emotional on the stand

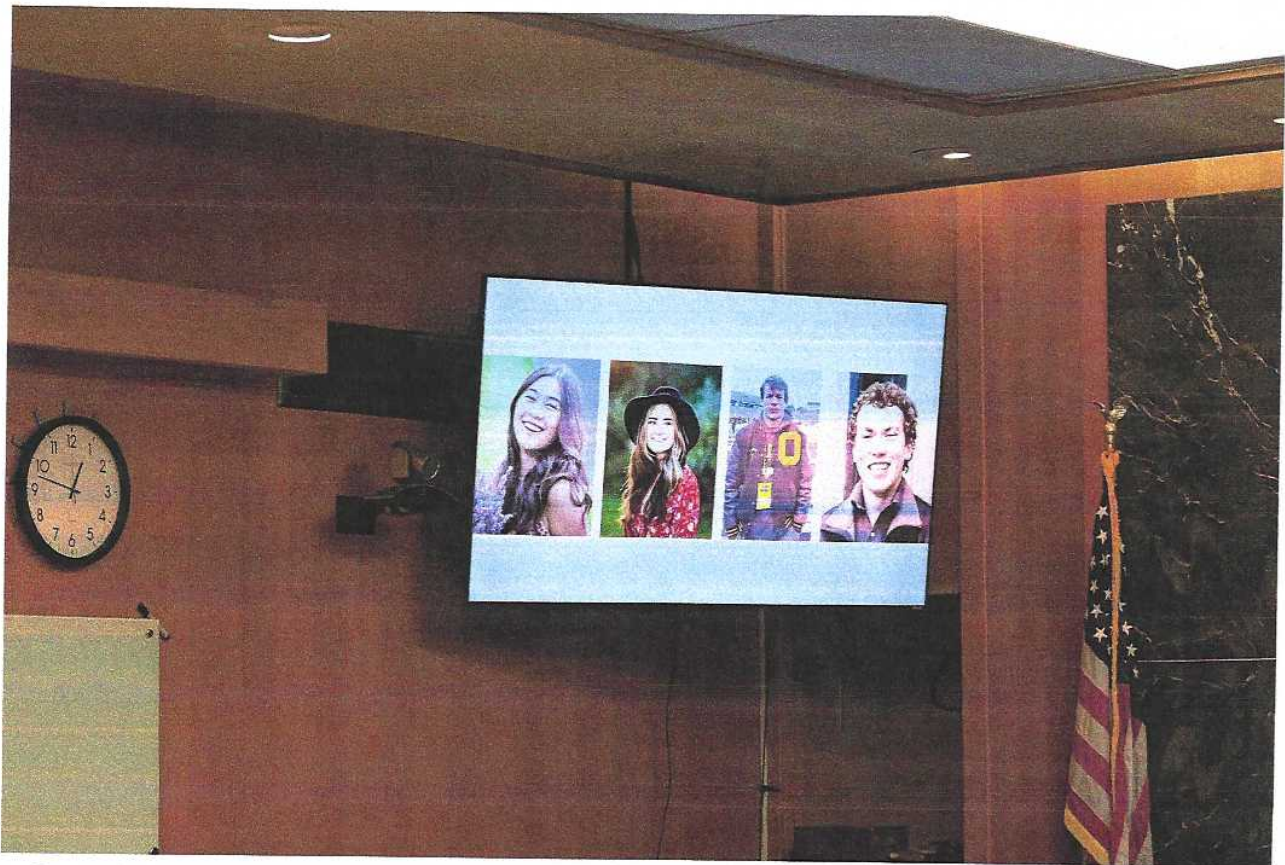
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Detective Lt. Timothy Willis, with the Oakland County Sheriff's Office, became emotional while testifying on Feb. 1, 2024. (The Washington Post)

One night in late January, midway through the trial, Willis, Keast and a paralegal gathered in the fifth-floor media room to run through his testimony a final time. They all knew the most wrenching moment would come when Keast played the surveillance footage of the shooting and Willis described what it showed.

The paralegal pulled up the video on an 87-inch TV screen. A long hallway appeared with dozens of students walking over checkered carpet, just before the rampage began. Keast asked Willis to identify who was in the frame.

He named two survivors, a boy about to be shot in the leg and a girl struck in the neck and chest. He pointed out Hana St. Juliana, who stood near the window with a friend. Both were hit and fell to the floor, close enough for the girl to stroke Hana's hair, begging her to stay alive.



From left, photos of Hana St. Juliana, Madisyn Baldwin, Tate Myre and Justin Shilling, who were all shot and killed at Oxford High, are displayed on a monitor in court.

“And Madisyn’s down there,” Willis narrated, swaying from side to side as a video he’d watched hundreds of times continued.

Nicole Beausoleil had watched it once, too, on the same screen. She insisted McDonald show it to her because she’d heard so many conflicting rumors about her daughter’s death. She sat in front of the TV as Madisyn panicked at the sound of the first shot and collapsed into a ball, rigid as Ethan Crumbley rushed over. He pressed the gun his parents had given him to her head. He pulled the trigger.

Afterward, when Beausoleil could breathe again, the prosecutors played her a clip of Madisyn around the corner, happy, in the final moments before the shooting. Beausoleil asked them to pause it. She stood and approached the screen, reaching her hands out toward her daughter.



Willis enters the courtroom with a box of evidence.

Months later, in the same room, Willis finished identifying the other students in

the video.

“Dude, I don’t think I’m gonna cry,” he told Keast, envisioning his testimony.

“Until you look up and see Nicole,” the paralegal replied.

“I know,” Willis said, shaking his head. He looked away and pressed tears from his eyes.

## ‘Bring the jury in’



Judge Cheryl Matthews discusses an issue with Smith, Keast and McDonald.

**I**t shouldn’t have come to this, but McDonald knew there was no time to address what had gone wrong, not now. Jennifer Crumbley’s defense attorney had just rested her case, on the trial’s ninth day, and when the

lunch break ended, McDonald would have to deliver a closing argument she hadn't finished writing.

"I need a response to, 'This hasn't been done before. This is about a message,'" she said, her voice and expression leaking no trace of the anxiety coursing through her.

Sitting in her office, McDonald leaned back in a chair as VanWert and her appellate expert, Joe Shada, frantically stitched together the slide presentation of the evidence she would present to the jury. She anticipated that Smith, in her own closing, would pressure jurors not just to consider the verdict but also its wider ramifications for parents and gun owners.

"She could say, like, 'Do you want to be the jury that for the first time ever' — I don't know what she's going to say," McDonald fretted, imagining the defense's tactics.

"Involuntary manslaughter charges are not novel. They are not unique," VanWert suggested. "What's unique are these set of facts."

McDonald moved over to her desk computer to start typing as Keast checked a message on his phone.

"It's 12:45 for jury instructions," he told her.

"Wait, what?" she said.

The judge had denied their request for more time. McDonald only had 30 minutes left.

It would be the last chapter in a 20-hour stretch that was among the most trying in her career.

The previous afternoon, on the first day of February, Jennifer Crumbley had taken the stand, disputing that the gun actually belonged to her son and

depicting herself as a caring mother who never could have foreseen her son's violence. But her testimony concluded with what the prosecution viewed as two monumental mistakes. She told jurors that, even in hindsight, she would not have done anything differently and later stopped just short of calling herself a victim but agreeing with Smith that she'd lost "everything."



▶ **'I wouldn't have' done anything differently**  
1:11

While testifying on Feb. 1, 2024, Jennifer Crumbley said she reflected "after this all happened," and she "wouldn't have" done anything differently. (The Washington Post)

Afterward, on the elevator, it struck McDonald that Smith, who had suggested she intended to call several witnesses aside from her client, might not. That meant McDonald would have to give her closing argument the next day, after Keast cross-examined Crumbley. She told him they needed to start preparing.

In the war room, the team spent the next hour charting Keast's approach.

"We have to address closing," McDonald said, "because cross is super important, but I have to get —"

"Maybe we should split up into two teams?" Keast asked.

But Keast, whom McDonald relied on to manage the staff's assignments, never told them to, and she was too exhausted and frustrated to give more orders.

For the first time, she was doubting whether she should have led the prosecution at all. Her presence and approach seemed to incite Smith, who in one outburst pointed at the prosecutor and accused her of "parading" painful evidence in front of the victims' families. McDonald's exchanges with the judge, Cheryl Matthews, a former prosecutor she'd known for years, had also grown tense.

She worried that her involvement made the case harder to win. With James Crumbley's trial scheduled to begin in March, she considered withdrawing.



McDonald discusses strategy with the rest of the prosecution team.

Just before midnight, her team sent a draft of the slide presentation that would accompany her closing, and she responded with edits at 1:18 a.m. Its construction would continue through the morning and past Keast's cross-examination.

As the strain on McDonald was peaking, she learned that the New York Times had published an essay questioning the entire premise of the prosecution with the headline, “What Is This Mother Really Guilty Of?” McDonald worried it might represent how some jurors viewed the defendant or, worse, that they would violate the judge’s order to avoid news coverage and read the piece. She told Keast to soften his approach to cross-examining Jennifer Crumbley, and he did, applying just enough pressure to elicit one meaningful slip: When talking about her son, she’d referred to the murder weapon as “his gun.”

Now the lunch break had ended, and Keast and McDonald were back at the prosecution table, stalling. VanWert and Shada hadn’t yet arrived with the thumb drive that held the closing presentation.

### Deep Reads

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McDonald turned to a paralegal sitting behind her.

“What am I supposed to do,” she asked, “get up and tap dance?”

VanWert and Shada hurried in, but they still hadn’t finished. The men squeezed into the second row of the gallery and opened their laptops.

“All right, do you want me to bring the jury in now?” the judge asked the attorneys.

“Yes, please,” Smith said.

“One moment,” McDonald replied, looking back.

Shada titled the last unfinished slide “Defendant’s Statements” and dashed out the final bullet point: “took HIS gun away.” He hit save and rushed the thumb drive up to Keast.

The jurors took their seats.

“Prosecutor?” the judge said, and 90 seconds later, McDonald was standing at the podium.



► **Prosecution delivers closing argument**  
0:46

On Feb. 2, 2024, attorney Karen McDonald delivered her closing argument to the jury. (The Washington Post)

She clasped her hands, aware of the tremor that surfaced when she was tired and stressed. She smiled.

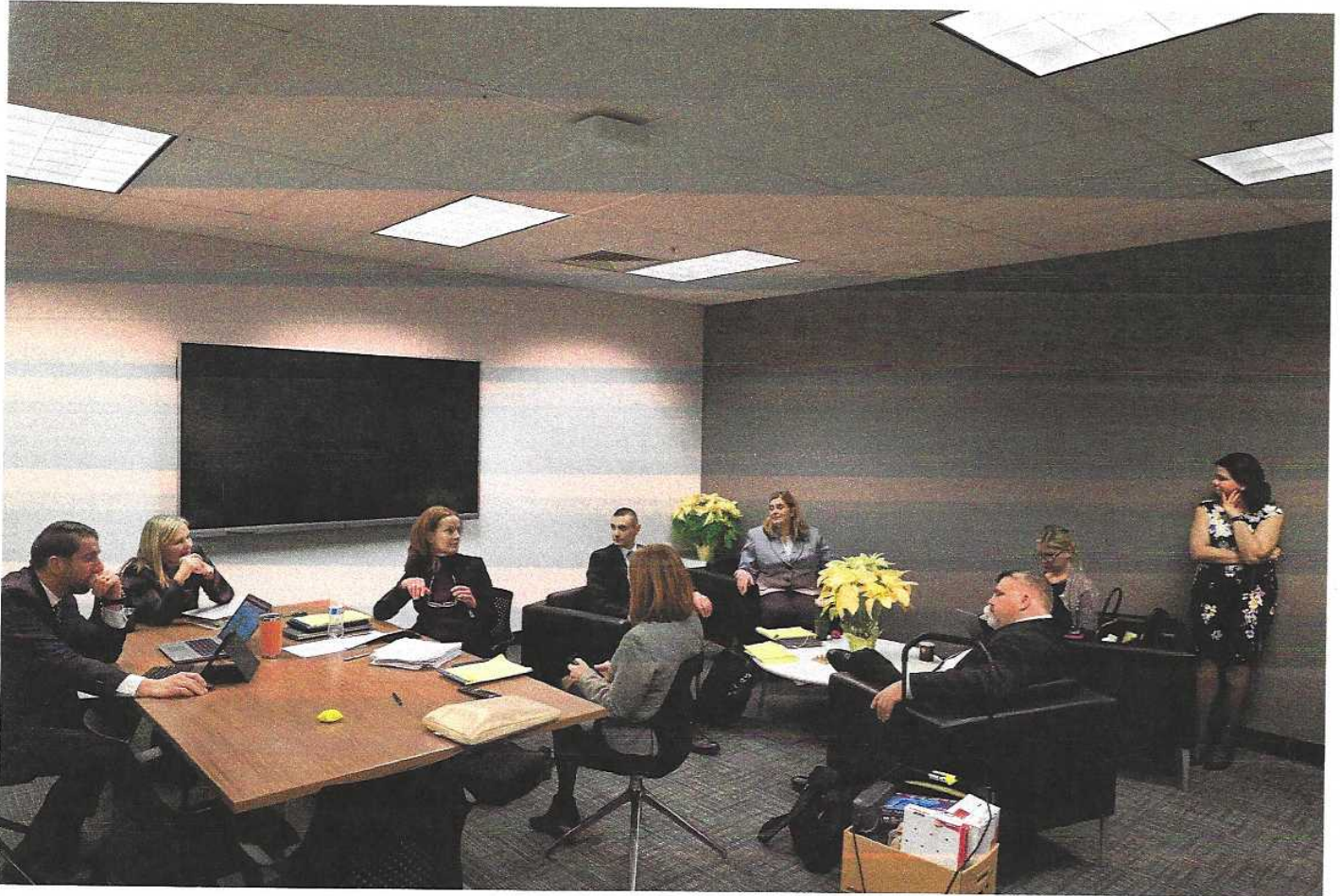
“Good afternoon,” the prosecutor said, and she began riffing off slides, some that she’d never seen before, hoping all of it would resonate with the jurors deciding her case.

Each of them watched and listened.

There was the woman in the front row who told the attorneys during jury selection that the case made her feel “undeniable rage.” There was the man behind her who appeared perpetually irritated, pressing his head into his hands. There was the mother who would later say that she was moved by the emotion McDonald showed in her final address, proof that the prosecutor believed in the case. And there was the college-educated professional with no guns and no kids

who thought the opposite, who had dismissed most of the evidence as inconsequential, who had already concluded that Jennifer Crumbley was not guilty.

## ‘A hung jury’



The prosecution team debriefs after a day of testimony.

**M**cDonald's chest tightened. "It's not that bad," she insisted to Keast as they walked out of Courtroom 2C, past a herd of TV reporters. Two weeks earlier, when the trial began, the court seated 17 jurors, with five to be made alternates before deliberations began. The judge had just held the random draw.

The original pool of 17 included five people that the prosecution's pre-trial

research identified as ideal jurors. Only two remained.

In the elevator, McDonald stood next to Keast in silence, resisting the intrusive thought washing over her: *We've lost*.

She walked straight to her office and shut the door.

“I’m actually — I’m good with the draw,” Keast told VanWert in the hallway.

“Every case I’ve ever tried, the alternate is the one I really wanted on. So it doesn’t really matter.”

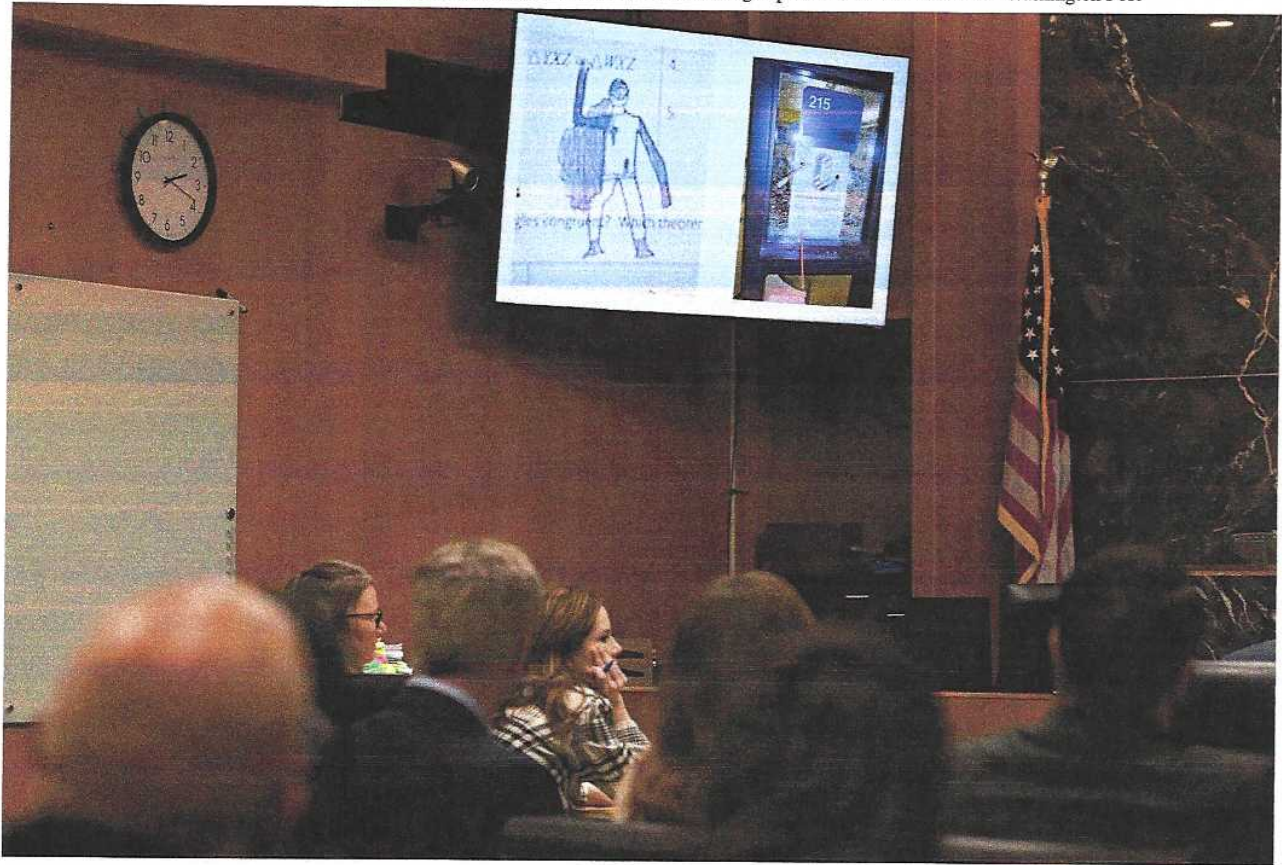
“I am *not* good with the draw,” VanWert replied.

In a room the size of a single-car garage, the jurors took their first poll, according to three of them, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe their deliberations. Eight voted guilty, two not guilty, two undecided.

By the next afternoon, only one not guilty vote would remain, but the holdout made clear from the start that he perceived the case differently from everyone else. He argued that the shooter’s drawing and the meeting it prompted at the high school were irrelevant, as were texts the teen sent to a friend about his parents ignoring his mental health crisis.

“I wanted to know where the f--- he got the gun,” he explained later in an interview with The Post.

An entry in the shooter’s journal that said he had “access to the gun and the ammo” wasn’t enough. The juror suspected, as Smith had argued, that it was the father’s responsibility to store the 9mm, even after other jurors reminded him that Jennifer Crumbley was the last adult seen with it in public, at the range.



A courtroom monitor displays Ethan Crumbley's drawing of a person shot dead beside a photo of bullet holes in a classroom.

Feeling cornered, his arguments intensified, he and the other jurors said. He yelled. He cursed.

“I guess we’re just going to have a hung jury,” he announced.

He sent two different questions to the judge that day. The first, a technical query about the law, led the prosecutors to believe a conviction was imminent. Then came the second question, about whether the jury could infer anything by the prosecution not calling the shooter or any other witness who could say how he got the gun.

“That question makes it seem like acquittal,” one local reporter in the gallery told another.

On the fifth floor, the prosecutors obsessed over who had asked the questions, huddling in McDonald’s office to compare handwriting on the notes with the

jurors' original questionnaires. That afternoon, McDonald forced herself to prepare for a hung jury, telling Keast they would immediately request to try Jennifer Crumbley a second time, right after her husband.

The holdout didn't change his mind overnight, but after they reconvened the next morning, he suddenly discovered something he thought investigators had missed. Crumbley testified that on the day she took her son to the range, her husband put the gun in the car before she left and removed it after she got back. But well before he returned home, Jennifer Crumbley posted a photo of the 9mm, taken in their kitchen, on Instagram. To the juror, that meant she must have brought the gun inside.



A video played in court shows Jennifer Crumbley and her teenage son at a gun range three days before the shooting at Oxford High.

But that's not what it meant. The photo had been taken the day before.

The juror was unnerved when he learned months later from a Post reporter that he'd made a mistake. His erroneous finding had been, to him, the most

convincing evidence, but not the only piece that persuaded him.

Another juror had noted that Jennifer Crumbley could easily have learned how to apply a cable lock from YouTube, and he agreed. He also fixated on an 11-second video, recorded three months before the shooting, that showed Ethan Crumbley loading a live round into his dad's .22-caliber pistol. Inches away lounged the teen's cat, Dexter.

The juror loved animals.

"Why the f--- am I defending these people?" he asked himself.

▶ **Ethan Crumbley loads gun**  
0:11

A video shows Ethan Crumbley loading his dad's handgun while the teen's cat, Dexter, lounges in the background. The video was taken on Aug. 20, 2021. (Oakland County Prosecutor's Office)

At 1:13 p.m., Keast's phone buzzed in the war room. A message from the clerk. He turned to McDonald: "We have a verdict."

She gasped, tossing her pen into the air. Keast rushed down to the fourth floor, trembling as he slipped on his dark gray suit jacket. McDonald burst into the hallway — "We have a verdict!" — and hurried to her office.

Her executive assistant, Kate Shannon, followed her inside. McDonald stood beside her desk, braced against it, peering into the corner. This was where she'd been when the news first came, 798 days earlier, about a shooting at a local high school.

"I think I'm going to pass out," McDonald was saying now.

"Have a seat. Take a breath," her assistant told her, and McDonald glared. There was no time.

McDonald leaned down to slide her heels on, but she couldn't do it. Her hands wouldn't work. Her feet wouldn't lift. Her entire body quaked.

"It's going to be okay," Shannon told her boss, a woman she'd met 20 years earlier and admired more than anyone else she'd ever known.

"It's all going to be okay," McDonald repeated, "no matter what they come back with."

"Yeah," Shannon said, and she hugged McDonald until the shaking subsided. The prosecutor took a long breath, then another. She pressed her feet into the heels.

In the packed courtroom, she and Keast studied the jurors' faces.

"They're not looking at us," McDonald told him, because she knew what that usually meant.

The foreperson, a young, dark-haired woman in chair No. 3, stood to read their verdict: "On count one of involuntary manslaughter..."

McDonald, her back straight and hands on the table, listened to the words that came next, but they didn't register right away. She could feel her heartbeat throbbing in her face. She leaned over to Keast.

“Did she say ‘guilty?’” McDonald whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “She did.”

## ‘She’s unreachable’



McDonald, who faced a barrage of death threats for prosecuting the Crumbleys, listens to members of her team debate legal strategy.

**A** month later, with deliberations in James Crumbley’s trial still days away, McDonald’s team gathered again in their windowless conference room, this time to discuss the threats he had made against her in jail calls.

Crumbley, who knew his conversations were being recorded, had referred to her as a “stupid f---ing whore bitch” and promised “retribution,” warning that she

was “f---ed when I get out” and would be “sucking on a f---ing hot rock down in hell soon.”

At the prosecution’s behest, Matthews, the judge, announced in court that she would restrict his communication privileges but didn’t explain why, an omission that irked McDonald. She didn’t want to be viewed as a victim, but she did want to expose what Crumbley had done.

The attorneys debated whether they could, or should, release details of the calls.

VanWert feared a mistrial if the jurors heard about them.

“We *do not* want to start over,” he said.

An investigator turned to McDonald, sitting at the far end of the table, and asked what they would gain, strategically, by divulging the calls.

“Everybody forgets,” McDonald said. “I’m still a human being, and having to read that shit ... it is not okay.”

But it wasn’t just the calls. “I have someone sitting in front of my house 24/7. I can’t go anywhere. I mean, it’s just a lot.”

She knew VanWert was right, though. Nothing could jeopardize the case. The threats would remain a secret for now.



An exhausted Keast and VanWert discuss Jennifer Crumbley's trial.

The next week, a man who had harassed her during her time as a judge appeared outside the courtroom. He was later arrested.

By then, the potential danger in her life had already reshaped it.

Her husband, Jeff Weiss, realized how much she had changed when he took her to a Detroit Pistons game last year. A corporate attorney, he'd gotten them seats near the court through his firm. Within minutes, the crowd felt too big, the security too sparse, the exits too far away. She had to leave.

"It was so unlike her," Weiss said.

She went out less and less, finding brief respite in novels and reality TV, mostly "Survivor." But even at home, she never escaped the case. She spoke to the victims' families nearly every day, at all hours, an antidote to self-pity. Her worst

days would never compare to theirs, she'd tell her husband. Her children were alive.

Before the shooting, there was a lightness to McDonald, at least with family and friends, said her 26-year-old daughter, Maeve Stargardt, describing her as a "total goof" who reveled in throwing surprise parties and giving quirky presents. She watched that part of her mom wither.

"She's unreachable," Stargardt said, but she'd accepted that's what her mother needed to become, not just to support four grieving families, but also to overcome the persistent doubts about her decisions.

She hadn't just charged the parents, despite fierce resistance, she had charged their son with terrorism, believed to be a first for a school shooter, so she could expand the number of students legally considered victims. She'd refused to release video from inside the school to the public, despite pressure to do so.

Then, before closing arguments in James Crumbley's trial, she tucked a cable lock into her bag and walked to court.

Two hours later, she was standing before the jurors, reviewing all the "tragically small" ways he could have stopped his son.



### McDonald demonstrates gun lock

1:52

Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald demonstrated to the jury how locking a gun could be done in less than ten seconds. (The Washington Post)

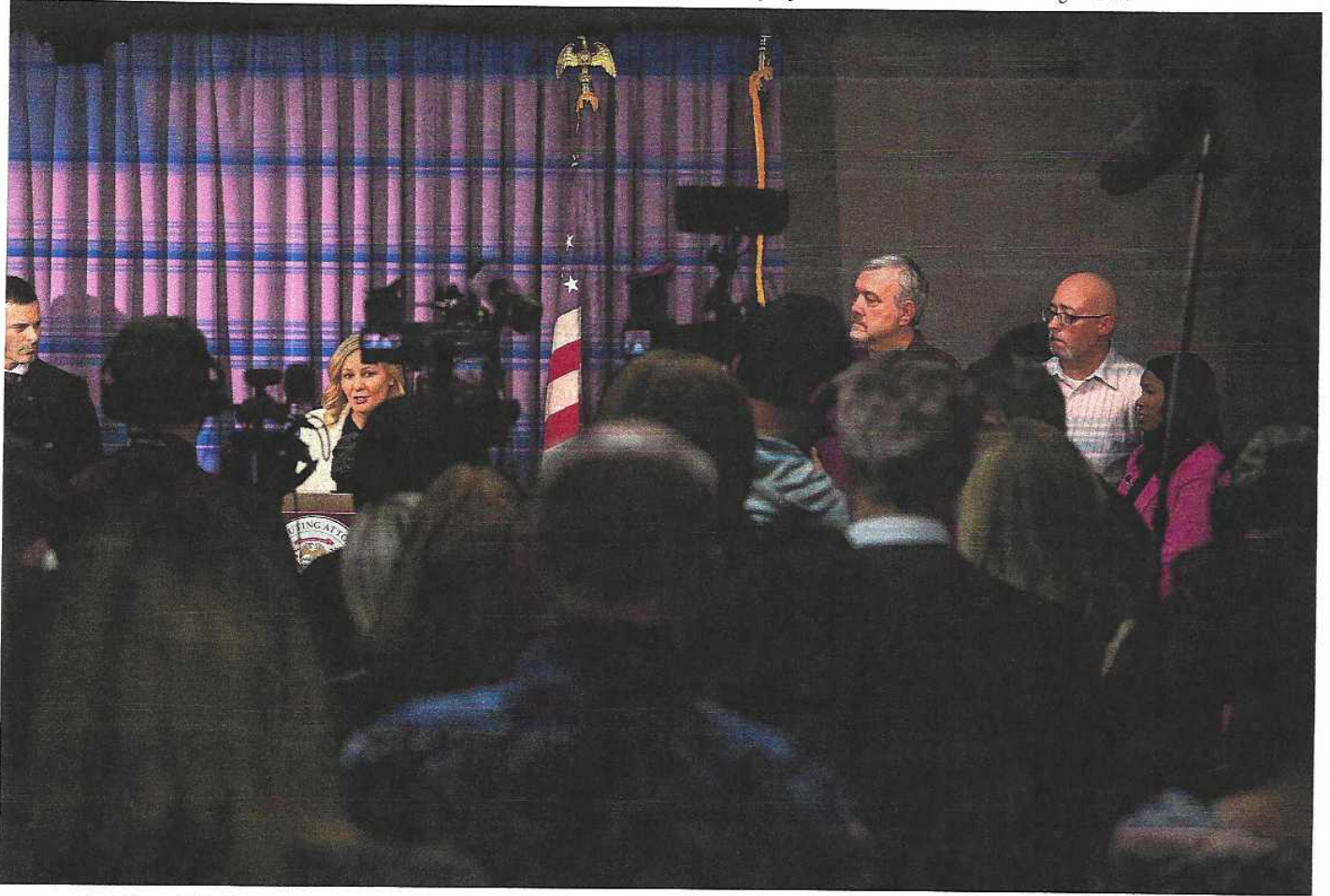
“And then we know there was a cable lock,” she said, picking up the small, white box with “Oxford High School,” written in blue ink, on the top. She pulled on a pair of latex gloves. The TV camera zoomed in.

Keast kept taking notes on his yellow legal pad, too anxious to look over. “She’s doing it,” he jotted, underlining the words. In the gallery, VanWert, who had given McDonald the idea, stared at the floor. Willis, sitting just behind her, watched every second, because by then, he knew who McDonald was.

She picked up the 9mm in her left hand and, with her right, threaded the cable through the magazine well. She curled the tip down. She clicked it into the lock. She turned the key.

“That takes less than 10 seconds,” she told the jury, stripping off her gloves and dropping them on the table.

## ‘This is what it looks like’



McDonald holds a news conference after James Crumbley's trial. Listening are Keast, left, and St. Juliana and Craig Shilling, whose son was killed, far right.

She had appeared on CBS News and MSNBC, and more conversations awaited, with CNN's Anderson Cooper, NPR, an ABC News crew making a documentary. All three of the network nightly news programs had led with Jennifer Crumbley's conviction, and the day after her husband was found guilty, too, McDonald had her hair and makeup done at 6 a.m. and finished her last interview at 6 p.m.

She had talked and talked, but now she was quiet, riding in the back of a black SUV, indie folk music playing in her AirPods. In less than an hour, the Crumbleys' April 9 sentencing hearing would begin.

On her lap rested a manila folder, and inside it were copies of victim-impact statements, each marked with sticky notes indicating the author. "Nicole Beausoleil," read one. "Steve St. Juliana," read another. In her mind, she rehearsed what she would tell the judge about the consequences of the

Crumbleys' crimes. *This is what it looks like*, she would say, turning to the side and motioning to the broken families behind her.



Jennifer Crumbley looks at her husband, James, during the couple's sentencing hearing in April. (Bill Pugliano/Getty Images)

At the hearing, both of the Crumbleys addressed the judge, showing little remorse but pleading for leniency. Matthews didn't listen, issuing the maximum sentence allowed under the law, 10 to 15 years in prison.

As the couple was led away in shackles and jumpsuits, McDonald sat at the prosecution table, refusing to look at them. When they were gone, she glanced back, to the parents of the dead children.

In a private meeting afterward, the families thanked McDonald and Keast for all they'd sacrificed, a gesture that always made them uncomfortable. The parents still wanted charges brought against school staff, a step prosecutors had concluded the evidence didn't support, but McDonald assured them that the

hearing didn't represent an ending, not for her. They could still call. She would still answer.

That afternoon, McDonald and Keast met in her office, where they tried to process the sentence, the trials, who they were now. There would be no sweeping moment of catharsis, though the prosecutors had come close to one on the night of the verdict against James Crumbley. The team had huddled in the war room once again, this time sipping white wine and bourbon from plastic cups.



McDonald receives a hug from a colleague after jurors found James Crumbley guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

"There's going to be a mom and a dad who don't walk by an empty bedroom at night because of what everybody in this room did," Keast had said, voice unsteady. "Coming home at 1 in the morning, waking up at 5, I wouldn't have changed a second of it, not one f---ing second."

By the sentencing, he'd begun trying to make up for time lost with his family, but Keast felt adrift, his boss knew, because the work had anchored him, and now

the work was done.

McDonald told him he needed therapy. He told her the same.

She packed her bag and took an elevator down to the awaiting SUV. It was nearing twilight when the driver turned down her street, passing the armed security guard parked out front. Her husband remained at work, and her son, in town visiting, hadn't come home yet. Birdie, her dog, was with the trainer.

The prosecutor walked up the brick path to the porch. She opened her front door, still made of glass. She heard nothing. She stepped inside, alone.

### **About this story**

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## **DEEP READS**