

East Lansing, Michigan is the proud home of Michigan State University. Collegeville, as it was once known, grew in tandem with the nation's premier land grant university and was chartered formally as East Lansing in 1907. As MSU developed into a large, research-driven institution and grew exponentially, the relationship between municipality and school ebbed and flowed, much like the river they share. Since the early 2000s MSU has dedicated specific staff to work on all efforts town-gown, turning its attention to everything from economic development and housing to public safety and holistic student success. Presidents, provosts, boards of trustees, councils, mayors, and city managers brought forth their individual agendas and styles, leaving their stamp on the relationship, for better or worse. Social, political, and economic factors have always given context for the relationship, as they have in every town-gown space.

For the last several years, both communities, deeply intertwined, faced leadership changes at the highest levels and a series of crises, some from within and others imposed by the outside world. The Nassar Tragedy and the unprecedented impacts of the Covid pandemic accelerated more open and connected discourse, including the creation of routine teams and meetings between multiple stakeholder partners. The interest began to expand beyond the designated town-gown people. The problem-solving required an all hands on deck approach, speeding change and improving communication, layering rapid response over steady and steadfast relationship building from earlier more fractious times.

On the evening of Monday, February 13, 2023, a mass shooting occurred on the campus of Michigan State University, in spaces directly adjacent to its off-campus border. The event had immediate ramifications that reverberated throughout the town-gown community. While this horrific incident resembled other gun-related tragedies that have become so ubiquitous in the United States today, this surreal experience was met with action and dignity befitting a long-cultivated town-gown relationship: the creation of an off campus mental health crisis center, fashioned and established within hours of the shooting and open to ANYone in need. It is that unwavering community and university collaboration that is so deserving of recognition.

Monday, February 13, 2023, was a typical bustling day into evening on campus. The weather was unseasonably warm for a Michigan winter, topping out in the upper 40s with plenty of sunshine. MSU students attended evening classes, some talking about Valentine's Day plans, others stepping up projects and assignments as they began the sixth week of the semester. Faculty and staff had started another week in earnest, grading papers, meeting with committees, and planning for spring break. The university's Board of Trustees had met the previous Friday with a new Board Chair at the helm; the Interim President providing praise for her leadership team; and approval to proceed to build the new freestanding multicultural center in April.

Across the street, the City of East Lansing's Interim City Manager was arriving at the airport. No stranger to East Lansing, he'd previously served as the Fire Chief and was returning in a new capacity, amid some tumultuous staffing changes city-wide.

At 8:18pm a gunman fired his first shots at Berkey Hall on MSU's north campus, adjacent to Grand River Avenue. By 8:24pm, he had fired more shots at a second building, the MSU Union which was located further west along the avenue. He quickly escaped on foot, leaving 3 students dead on campus and 5 students seriously injured. Across campus, East Lansing, and greater Lansing region itself, warnings of "Run, Hide, Fight" were shared repeatedly through text alerts and social media posts. People responded by barricading themselves in their residence hall rooms, in local restaurant kitchens, in community bathrooms, and apartment closets for three hours while the gunman was on the move. Over 2300 calls for service and tips poured into county dispatch. 37 agencies with 100 officers, 10 special force units and 32 ambulances came from communities near and far to assist in every feasible manner.

The MSU Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was immediately activated after the first shots and approximately 50 university leaders headed into the EOC to begin a long night of emergency planning. Campus leaders made decisions for their divisional areas in a very calm and collaborative way despite the chaos nearby. From decisions about closing the university to protocols on public transportation, disciplined and intensive discourse occurred across the room. In one corner, Dr. Alexis Travis found her seat. Travis was the newly hired Assistant Provost and Executive Director of the recently formed University Health and Wellbeing Unit. Travis found herself seated beside Suchitra Webster (Director of Student and Community Relations) and Dr. Janet Lillie (AVP for Community Relations). As events unfolded in the EOC, it became quickly evident that mental health services would be needed by many people, not only at MSU, but across the community. With MSU experiencing the crisis within its campus and given the proximity of the buildings where the shootings occurred (adjacent to the east-west thoroughfare Grand River Avenue, town to the north and university to the south), Webster and Lillie began to realize that a different space would have to be found. An off-campus location was imperative.

By 10:30 pm on the night of Feb 13th, after two text messages, East Lansing's Hannah Community Center was secured as a facility, and soon thereafter, a network of mental health providers from regional area school districts were secured to deliver care and support, and smaller teams of MSU staff were tapped to be deployed to organize and manage the operational aspects of the services. Years of strong town-gown relationship building expedited this process, allowing the center to be established within minutes.

At 6am on Tuesday, February 14th, staff were ready at the Hannah Community Center to throw open the doors and welcome all in need. Clinicians, therapy and service dogs, staff from both the university and city arrived, as did food and beverage donations, notes of encouragement and compassion and empathy for anyone who needed the support.

The night had brought sirens, helicopters, and a fervor across all communications channels: "My daughter had a class in that building." "Two of the officers on scene have kids in my elementary school." "My father lives near the gunman's house." "My sister is an ER nurse." "Is it safe now?"

With daybreak came uncertainty and shock. Some came in and sheepishly asked if they might pet a dog. Some had not eaten and were visibly shaken. Others asked for a clinician immediately. School-children brought handwritten cards in early elementary scrawl to remind people that they mattered and that they were loved. Assisted living communities sent posters with affirmations signed by all residents.

The media appeared and were ushered down corridors away from the arrivals. University faculty and staff sought help away from their colleagues and professional home. Students who were not ready to return to campus found solace in East Lansing. Parents from both town and gown came in for reassurance. School districts and care agencies sent their best and did it day after day after day.

For three weeks, the Hannah Community Center operated to serve community needs. Staff from the center and the university worked seamlessly to put collective needs first, to put human needs above all else. That harrowing night served as a kind of crucible for the town-gown community. There was no us and them – only people together to heal and help one another.