

## “We believe there will be others”

*Illana Perlman* — Hospital social worker



Illana Perlman was having a coffee with a colleague at the Tim Hortons at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre when the Code Orange sounded. In her nearly 28 years at the hospital, there had been plenty of other alerts — ones for cardiac arrests and babies coming — but never the one that signals a mass casualty event.

Perlman, a social worker in the hospital’s trauma program, helped create the Family Information and Support Centre after the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks.

So in those first minutes, as the scope of the van attack was yet uncertain, Perlman thought of that day, when, for a spell, Toronto had been prepared to receive patients.

She made a straight line for “emerg” as stretchers began to arrive, brought by paramedics handing the injured, some fatally so, to the hospital’s nurses and doctors.

Perlman, two social workers from the emergency and cardiology departments, and Barbara Richmond, the hospital’s emergency preparedness manager, secured an

auditorium for the families that would be coming. Someone retrieved a hockey bag containing orange t-shirts for the FISC team, clipboards and other items.

Perlman, originally from South Africa, struggled to believe this was actually happening in Toronto, and on a stretch of Yonge St. that had been part of her commute to work for 23 years.

After four to five hours, the families started arriving.

“When it happened it happened very slowly,” Perlman says.

There was no chaos. Families were ferried from the auditorium to the ICU and back, with the hope of identifying people. Perlman remembers being impressed by how staff just did “whatever we needed to do, as a team, and as a big team. I think the level of camaraderie and the mutual support of the staff was really what sticks with me.

“That’s what’s kept me working here for so long. It’s the kind of people you work with, and it really was borne out that day.”

Still, there were lessons learned.

For instance, the hospital had used iPhone snapshots to confirm victims’ identities with officials at the scene, but many on the trauma program team didn’t have each other’s phone numbers. The team now uses a WhatsApp group to communicate.

Later, the hospital had a doctor who worked on the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting come talk to staff, to help them prepare for even larger events.

Perlman says she’s thankful what she saw was not on the scale of Las Vegas, that hundreds of people didn’t converge on the hospital in the hours after the attack.

“Many of us were thinking, what would that have looked like if it had been those numbers,” Perlman says. “We believe there will be others, and we will do even better. But, ultimately the biggest sadness is we should not be doing any of this.”

Perlman’s day stretched into the next. She got home after 2 a.m. to catch a few hours of sleep before reporting back for 6 a.m.

Reflecting on the day, she thinks of the “many, many lives” that were affected, and how a first anniversary brings everything back. “It almost re-traumatizes these people,” she says. “I’ve come to meet people years later, after they’ve had their traumatic events, and just know that this is just the beginning.”

But there is a choice, she says, pointing to holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's 1946 book, *Man's Search For Meaning*. In it, he writes: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

That has always guided Perlman. "Because I go in after the event. You can't change what's happened but when you work with people clinically as they survive through trauma, what I sort of try to help them through is just see they do have a choice in how they respond and how they deal with things going forward."