

# 'It could have been me' says Bel Air survivor of Navy Yard rampage

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**F**or Donna Richardson, of Bel Air, the day after the deadly shooting rampage at the Washington Navy Yard was more frightening than the previous day's actual events.

"The whole thing I just felt like I was in a movie scene," she said of what it was like to be in the midst of the chaos.

Richardson said Tuesday during an interview from her home she worked in the same building, Building 197, where investigators say suspected shooter Aaron Alexis began his rampage shortly after 8 a.m. Monday.

"Just thinking about the possibilities and being so close, it could have been me if I had taken a different path," Richardson said.

The building serves as the headquarters of the Naval Sea Systems Command, where about 3,000 people work, according to *The Washington Post*. In all, about 16,000 people work at the Navy Yard, which was established along the Anacostia River in Washington in 1799.

Richardson, a civilian defense employee, is a human resources division chief for staffing and classification. She was starting her sixth day at work on the third floor of the building. Law enforcement investigators have said Alexis shot a number of his victims on the third and fourth floors of that building.

The 34-year-old military contract worker used his identification card, which was valid, to enter the building.

Thirteen people, including Alexis, were dead by the end of the rampage, and eight more were wounded, according to CNN.

Richardson said she was at her desk around 8:15 a.m. Monday when she heard the first shot, which she described as "just a loud pop."

She said her co-workers reacted to the noise, and began looking down the hall to see what was happening.

"I didn't know if something large had fallen or exploded, or why, and people were just reacting to that," Richardson said.

Then she heard two more loud pops.

"People were starting to get up out of their seats and scramble around," she said.

Richardson said the fire alarm went off, and she and her co-workers headed down a stairwell and gathered outside near the riverfront.

She said police officers told employees to hurry out "because there was a shooter in the building."

## **Screaming, running away**

Richardson said people began screaming and running away after another shot was heard outside, and instructions came over the Navy Yard public address system for employees to take shelter in the nearest building.

She and about 100 people sheltered in the Navy Yard's nearby museum and stayed there until about 3:30 p.m. Monday.

Richardson said many of the people she took shelter with did not have cell phones because workers are not permitted to bring cell phones with cameras into the installation.

Those who did have cell phones shared them, and Richardson was able to get in touch with her daughter, Kayla Yi, who lives in Beltsville and works in Laurel, through Facebook.

People who had phones were able to get updates, and different stories circulated about whether there were two or four shooters, and whether the shooting was a terrorist attack.

She said bathrooms and drinking water were available in the museum, but the only food available was what employees were able to carry with them.

Richardson said those who had their lunches "shared granola bars and things like that throughout the day."

She said FBI SWAT agents passed through the museum about two hours after the employees arrived to sweep the building, and then returned around 3:30 p.m. to bring those who had sought refuge there to another facility for interviews.

Richardson said she was asked where she was when the shooting started, and what she had heard or seen.

She was then taken by bus to Nationals Park, the home of the Washington Nationals baseball team, which is about a mile and a half west of the Navy Yard.

Richardson spent about an hour waiting for her daughter to pick her up; representatives of the American Red Cross were on hand, and Navy Secretary Ray Mabus spoke with her and other Navy Yard staff.

She told Mabus that she had been on the third floor and left down a stairwell, and the Navy secretary told her he spoke with a wounded victim who had been shot while coming down a stairwell in the same building.

"That could have been anybody, I guess," Richardson said.

Richardson was at home in Bel Air Tuesday, and gathering information about when she could return to work.

She did not expect to be back for several days, and thought "everybody will be uneasy for quite a while."

Richardson, as a new employee, did not know anyone who was wounded or killed in the shooting.

She had noticed that her co-workers are "very friendly, and it's like a family there."

"They look out for each other and take care of each other, so I think they'll be able to get through it," she said.

## **Outside looking in**

Richardson's daughter Yi didn't realize Monday morning when she posted a message on Facebook about saying prayers for the people involved in the shooting at the Washington Navy Yard that her mother was among that group.

It wasn't until almost noon that Richardson, who had only recently begun making the commute from Bel Air to D.C. for her new job, replied on the social media site with something like, "Yeah, including your mother, I'm on lockdown."

Yi, a former editorial assistant at *The Aegis*, is from Aberdeen, but lives in Beltsville. She first heard news of the shooting while she was at work at Lakeside Veterinary Center in Laurel, where she spends most of her waking hours. She also is a regular at CrossFit Laurel.

She was in the lobby of the veterinary center listening to talk radio with her colleagues when she heard the news.

"I heard there was a shooting in the Naval Yard. And it took me a minute, because my mom's new there, but I thought, isn't mom's job at the Navy Yard? I wasn't sure what building she was in," Yi said. "I thought to myself, it will be OK, I'm probably getting worked up over nothing. It's probably not her building."

"But I was worried and a little freaked out. I couldn't really focus at work," she said.

Yi was trying to reach her mom by phone, but didn't have a number for her at work and her mom's cell phone was in her car. She finally got her around noon and that's when she realized how close her mom was to danger.

"Once I found she was there and they were on lockdown and she was so close to harm's way, I broke down at work. I said I had to go," Yi said. "I wanted to go home and be ready to go get her."

Yi said her mom didn't see anyone get shot nor did she see anyone who was injured, but a lot of people in her office knew the people who were killed or hurt.

"She was listening to stories from them. And one woman in her office, when they walked out of the building, was covered in blood. In a mad scramble to get out, she was covered in blood, but doesn't know how," Yi said. "There are lots of horrific stories, I'm glad she didn't have to experience them first-hand. To be in the midst of it must be really crazy."

Yi sat at home "waiting, waiting, waiting" to hear from her mother again. She waited about four hours, until about 4 p.m. when Richardson called and asked her daughter to come get her.

"She was just her regular, cool self. 'I'm at Nationals Park, can you come get me?'" Yi said of her mom, who called from a borrowed phone.

"I got up, shot out the door and got there as fast as I could," Yi said, adding that the stadium is usually about 20 minutes from her house.

Once she got there it was a different story. Yi said she must have circled the parking lot eight times.

"I kept seeing the same traffic people, who told me to go to the next light, go to the next light. At one point I started crying and one guy felt sorry for me and told me to go down one street. That didn't work either," she said.

Eventually, someone told her to park and walk, which she did. When Yi got to the garage, her mother was sitting on the curb waiting. She was one of the last people to be picked up.

"Finally I got to her. Of course, I cried more than she did," Yi said. "I just felt relief. All day I couldn't stay calm until I knew she was safe and sound. I was relieved to be able to take her home."

Yi joked that her mom looked a little pitiful sitting on the curb by herself, and a little like a refugee with her small bottle of water. And as they walked back to the car, Yi couldn't help but think how hungry her mom must be, since she hadn't been able to really eat.

"I was just thinking how traumatic it must have been for her," she said.

As they left the garage, Yi and her mom were swarmed by the media.

"We must have looked pitiful," she said.

Twenty-four hours later, "it almost feels like it didn't happen," Yi said. "I'm back to life as usual. I came into work, at 7:30, do my thing. I know she's safe at home. I'm dealing now with the new-found fame thing more than anything."

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