

Hitmen for Hire

Try to remember being sixteen. Think about where you stood socially – popular or peripheral; inside or outside the important cliques? Who were your friends? Who turned out to be loyal and who let you down? And recall, if you can, what you wanted most back then, and pull up the emotions that accompanied that time. Hold onto that sense-memory of being a teenager, and maybe that empathy will help you understand the story you're about to hear.

Now imagine it's the Sunday night after Thanksgiving break in 2007, and you're a sixteen-year old sophomore at Arlington High School in LaGrange, just east of Poughkeepsie, New York. It was a great weekend -- too short, but still great -- and you're cruising through the MySpace pages of some friends to see what they've added since you checked last. Suddenly, you see something weird. One friend has posted a picture of your high school on his home page, with the words, "JUST WAIT – YOU'LL SEE" next to it. Below that, he identifies himself as a MALE, 26 YEARS OLD, LITTLETON, COLORADO, UNITED STATES. And, even stranger, under the ABOUT ME heading on the right side of the page, it says YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW ABOUT ME BUT YOU WILL KNOW EVERYTHING.

So you figure he's just being weird. You've heard him talk about Columbine at lunch sometimes with a couple of other guys who are on the wrestling team with him. But then you scroll down the page and you come to a digital countdown clock, with the YEARS MONTHS DAYS HOURS MINUTES SECONDS headings counting down from 2 years, 4 months, 25 days, etc., and you do some quick figuring to come up with around April 20, 2010. That's like two months before your class is supposed to graduate. Is that what he's talking about? You click on the UNTIL section of the countdown clock, but it doesn't switch to another screen or give any other information. What's up with that?

Time to see what his wrestling buds have to say. On the next home page, the words "Natural Selection" are all over the place. Isn't that what one of the shooters at Columbine had printed on his t-shirt the day of the massacre? You scroll down on this page now and you come to the HEROES section and, sure enough, there they are: Dylan (Vodka) Klebold and Eric (Reb) Harris. Across from that, in the blogs, you can see the

friend with the countdown clock on his home page has been responding a lot – just the usual, short lines until you scroll down further, where he says, “im not sure if ____ is for real about this ___ you need to leave comments and yell at him to change his Myspace and get his stuff together the clock is ticking”

You don’t have a good feeling about this, but you also know this second guy is even stranger than the first. He likes to make whacked-out videos and act crazy in school, so maybe these two are just riffing off each other on MySpace. Lots of kids do that – it’s no big deal. Time to check the third guy, just in case.

Oh, man. This guy’s even more out there than the other two. The first thing you see is his long personal belief profile, and right near the top, he says, If you're a girl you're a bitch. I'm sorry that's just how it is. Every single girl in the world is a bitch. I know that I'm going to do great things. I'm going to make a difference in the world, I've known this since I was little. We're going to kill every one. I try to be happy all the time because I know everyday is just one more day closer to the day I die. I Go To Arlington High School.

What do you do now? You know these guys. They wouldn’t pull anything as nuts as a Columbine attack at Arlington, would they? Making violent videos is one thing – I mean, turn on the TV, look on YouTube, play a video game – there’s violence everywhere. So these three guys are saying how cool Dylan and Eric were. So what? A lot of kids say that – not at school, but to each other, especially in the middle of a firefight in a game or something. You can’t rat them out just because they’re riffing on MySpace. But you don’t feel it’s all okay, either. So what’s next? It’s definitely not cool to talk to your parents about this. They’ll freak out and call Mr. Brooks, the principal, and that’ll get these three suspended for sure. But you’ve got to talk to somebody. Sleep on it. It’ll be cool. You can figure it out tomorrow.

New York State Trooper Luther Lorenzo is the School Resource Officer (SRO) at Arlington High School. It’s a big school – 3480 kids this year in the high school alone, more than in any other high school between New York City and Montreal – but he loves all the different issues that come up with such a big population. On Monday, November 26, right before first period, a student came into his office and told him about some disturbing websites he’d seen the night before. Arlington School District has firewalls up

to block student and staff access to questionable sites, so the SRO couldn't bring them up on his computer.

House Principal Rich Carroll was just down the hall, though, and Rich was the designated technology guru at Arlington. When Trooper Lorenzo brought the student into his office, Rich immediately followed a detour around the firewall and pulled up the sites. The student was a member of the friends list at all three MySpace sites, so he helped Rich navigate through them. Rich called in another House Principal, Scott Wood, and they all studied the sites together. There was definitely something of great concern -- they were agreed about that. But there was no specific, direct threat to anyone there yet, so they decided to consult with Tom Brooks, then ask the police how they should proceed and, for the moment, monitor the sites.

On Monday night, Scott Wood watched "Zero Hour," a video that was mentioned on one of the kids' pages. He found it on YouTube -- it was a Discovery Channel video, in eight 5-minute parts, and it was like a train wreck: he didn't want to watch, but he couldn't turn away. The more he watched the documentary that chronicled the shootings at Columbine High, the more tie-ins Scott remembered on his own students' websites from that morning. So on Tuesday, he and Rich again monitored the sites the whole day. That night, one of the kids mentioned a .45 revolver, and minutes later a picture of a gun appeared on one of the MySpace pages.

The next morning, Scott called in Rich and Trooper Lorenzo, showed them what he had found, and asked, "Is this enough to act?" Everyone agreed that it was, so they called Tom Brooks and got the okay to proceed. Only two of the three students involved in the plot had come to school that Wednesday morning, so Trooper Lorenzo brought one of them down to Rich Carroll's office. "We know what's going on," Rich began immediately, "What's the plan?"

The student reflexively displayed his what-are-you-talking-about face, but then he looked down and blurted out, "They want to bring guns in and stuff, and hurt people. I was scared at first, so I went along with it. I was going to get out of it when it got closer. I don't know when it was going to take place. We wanted to come during lunch. That's when most kids are gathered. We don't really have a plan. We just want to kill people with guns and pipe bombs."

In one sense, Rich couldn't believe what he was hearing. He knew this kid was on the wrestling team, so he couldn't see how bullying could factor into this. Why would he choose this direction, and why be part of a perverse plan to launch a Columbine-style massacre against a school where he was involved and popular? It didn't make any sense. After a few more questions, the kid started to shrug his shoulders and clam up, but Rich did learn that the second student should have a map on him.

When the second student arrived at Scott Wood's office, Scott asked if he had anything in his bag he shouldn't have, and the student answered, "I don't know." Then Scott asked permission to go through it, and the boy grunted. The map was easy to find. It had the three students' names on it, in different colors, and matching, color-coded lines that went to different offices in Arlington High School: the Principal's office; the SRO's office; the boys' locker room; and a safety office that had been moved since last year. When Scott asked about the map's purpose, the student claimed it was so he could show his 8th Grade sister around the building over summer vacation.

Next, Scott pulled the student's MySpace page up and started asking specific questions: why the picture of Arlington High School? ("It's just a picture of the school."); why a 26-year old from Littleton, Colorado? ("That's where Columbine is."); why a ticking clock? ("It's just a clock."); what's it counting down to? (shrug of the shoulders); What's the AS420 mean? ("Arlington shooters 420"); 420? ("That's the date of Columbine."); what does all this mean? Is there an attack planned on this school? ("I'm not in charge. _____ is the ringleader.") And then he wouldn't talk any more.

From there, Scott, Rich, and Tom Brooks followed the procedures that every high school in the state would – they called in the parents, suspended the two students at the school, set up superintendent hearings, called in the State Police, who picked up the third student at his home and also took custody of the students at the school, notified all the students, staff, and parents about what had happened, prepared the appropriate counseling and support staff, and waited for the press onslaught. They didn't have long to wait. Within an hour of the students being charged at the State Police barracks, the *Poughkeepsie Journal* was knocking on Principal Tom Brooks's door, and then the TV news reporters started arriving.

However, even after seeing the video footage of the rifles and handguns confiscated from the students' homes, many students, and a fair number of community members, thought Tom and his staff overreacted. Nobody brought a weapon into school; no one had been shot, or even personally threatened; these kids were good kids, athletes, popular; they're funny -- they were just joking around and, anyway, it was for 2010, two years away. As the *Poughkeepsie Journal* published follow-up articles though, citing the MySpace pages, more people studied the sites carefully, and then they found the videos on YouTube.

There were three of them, called "Hitmen for Hire" -- the same title Klebold and Harris had used for the video they made before they went into Columbine -- and they were more than shocking. On one, footage showing the two teenage killers in the Columbine cafeteria is interwoven with the following message: NINE YEARS AGO TWO BOYS HAD A VISION . . . BUT THEY NEVER GOT TO ACCOMPLISH IT (a photo of Klebold and Harris here, dead by self-inflicted gunshots, lying in the library at Columbine) . . . BUT NINE YEARS LATER TWO BOYS WILL CARRY OUT THAT VISION AND RESTORE THAT LOST FEAR INTO THE HEARTS OF MILLIONS . . . COMMING (sic) THIS THANKSGIVING . . . The video ends with a poster of a man's face, his lips covered by a moth with a death's head for a body -- a clear reference to *Silence of the Lambs* -- and then footage of a man being hit by a car, tossed through the air, and run over. The talk around school about joking died down after people watched those three videos.

For Tom Brooks, a Columbine-style plot to attack Arlington High School was his worst nightmare, and he was convinced these three students were serious about carrying through on it. All three have been charged with conspiracy -- a felony -- but they have lawyers and are out on bail, awaiting trial. Arlington School District has an order of protection against them, specifying that none of them can come on or near school district property. Representatives of the student government have submitted a list of safety recommendations, and Tom has installed an anonymous tip-line. "Rachel's Challenge," the faith-based educational program honoring the first student killed at Columbine, is scheduled for two appearances at Arlington High, one this Spring and one next Fall, so all 3480 students get a chance to experience it. Everyone has praised the student who

alerted Trooper Lorenzo to the plot, and everyone also agrees that communication is the only true key to prevention. It's a better outcome than Jonesboro, Arkansas or Virginia Tech or Columbine, that's for sure.

But Tom Brooks is still troubled. He hears the news of 3rd Graders planning to attack and kill their teacher in Waycross, Georgia. He sees the video of five girls who lure a friend over so they can beat her for half an hour, film it all, and then send the video to YouTube. Why are all these kids so drawn to the dark side? That's what Tom wants to know. Instead of going out and doing something positive, one of Arlington's three student plotters wrote on his MySpace page: "I want to be famous. I want to do something that people will remember." Is this the right way to be remembered? Would the plot have started at all if these kids hadn't found each other and fed off all the unhealthy media images of violence?

"It's too easy to blame it on the media," Tom says, "and every time when one of these things happens, it gets all of the attention and I think that might attract a kind of student who has a certain psychological profile – but that's too easy an answer. Individually, this thing may not have really developed into anything, but I think that when they found like-minded persons and they were able to recruit them and talk to them, that was the spark. Like Klebold and Harris, they found one another. But I really don't know why it keeps happening."

Why it keeps happening is only one of the unanswered questions that plagues us as educators. How, like Tom Brooks and the other vigilant administrators at Arlington, can we find out about threats in time to protect our communities? That's another crucial question, and one that relies clearly on the voluntary participation and consistent watchfulness of students and parents in a school district. But what kind of society are we forced to build when friend is forced into monitoring friend, and many of us must assess which among us might be venturing toward the heart of darkness? History offers up chilling examples of societies that divide their populations into "good" and "bad," and then isolate and erase the elements that they see as threats. That isn't a call to condone or ignore violent plots – just a cautionary reference – and maybe we're in crisis mode right now and we can't afford to ask questions that could undermine our resolve or hinder

preparedness. But the problem isn't going away. If anything, it's getting worse, and what we see as prevention today may only be a temporary, symptomatic cure. The underlying, systemic illness that seems to be making our children want to hurt others – either to be famous or for the adrenaline rush that violence brings or for whatever degraded reason -- has to be discovered and cured, or we'll never build the compassionate, educated society for which many of us are working.