

Community Notebook: How School Shootings Speak to Survivors

Recently, it was Virginia Tech on April 16, and those familiar, heartbreaking images of wounded or traumatized survivors, followed by the hate-filled shots of the killer with his 9mm, snarling threats and ranting, justifying the murders he was about to commit. Then two weeks later, Jon Romano appeared in Albany before the Appellate Division 3rd Judicial Department, where his lawyer, E. Stewart Jones, asked for an appeal to reduce Jon's 20-year prison sentence for the school shooting at Columbia High School in East Greenbush three years before. Since 2004, there have been significant and tragic school shootings in Red Lake, Minnesota, Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, Bailey, Colorado and, most recently of course, in Blacksburg, Virginia, that have claimed a total of 51 lives. And for Mike Bennett and John Sawchuk, the two principal survivors of the East Greenbush shooting, the continuing school violence leaves them nowhere to hide.

"I know when I heard about Virginia Tech," John Sawchuk admits, "my heart kind of dropped. You immediately start thinking about what happened here in East Greenbush, and it puts you in touch with what those folks are going through down there." Mike Bennett agrees, "The biggest thing is whenever you hear these stories, your heart just automatically goes out to the survivors, for what they're about to go through."

John Sawchuk is now Principal at Columbia High School, and Mike Bennett became an Assistant Principal there last January. They met with me on May 4 in John's office and talked about how every new incident of school violence brings back the terrible memories of their own brush with it.

For the last two years, I have been writing a book about the Jon Romano incident. I have corresponded with Jon, who is serving his sentence at a maximum-

security New York State prison (Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora), in an inmate population that includes Christopher Porco and Ralph Bucky Phillips.

I have been given access to some of his letters, and to the suicide note he left in his bedroom before he drove to Columbia High School that morning, as well as to the 86 witness statements that were generated by the different agencies that investigated the crime. I have interviewed almost everyone directly involved in the case -- including John Sawchuk, Mike Bennett, Jon Romano's mother, E. Stewart Jones, District Attorney Patricia DeAngelis, East Greenbush Police Chief Chris Lavin, and many of the administrators, teachers and students who were at the high school the day of the shooting -- and I can attest to the emotional devastation that this kind of violent incident leaves in its wake, even one like this where no one actually died.

On February 9, 2004, 16-year old Jon Romano carried a concealed 12-gauge shotgun, loaded with 5 Winchester Super X heavy game loads, into Columbia High School in East Greenbush and hid for twenty minutes in a bathroom stall on the 2nd floor of the South Tower. When Eric Farrell opened the door, Jon stepped out and pointed his shotgun at him. "Don't do this, man," Eric begged, backing out and then running into an empty classroom next door.

Jeff Kinary and Casey Steponik were in the hallway as Jon followed Eric out. As Jeff made eye contact with him, Jon raised the gun to waist level, pointed it at Jeff, and pulled the trigger. Jeff saw a flash of fire erupt from the barrel and he threw himself forward. The shot slammed into the wall behind him. Jeff's ears began to ring and he could hear Jon loading another round into the chamber, so he frantically crawled past the Social Studies Office and then ran toward the stairwell. He could see Casey just ahead of him, and then another shot exploded into the wall beside Casey's legs. "A kid has a gun," Casey screamed as he leapt down the stairs, with Jeff shouting, "He shot at us!" right behind him. They ran as fast as they could, afraid to even look back, but Jon wasn't following them - he was moving toward a classroom.

John Sawchuk, the Assistant Principal, happened to be observing a Math class that morning on the 2nd floor of the South Tower, and when he heard the first gunshot, he was afraid something might have blown up in the metal shop downstairs. Mike Bennett, a Special Education teacher meeting with students two doors down from where John was, thought some metal I-beams may have fallen off a construction truck outside. They stepped out of the classrooms at the same instant and, suddenly, there was another gunshot, unmistakable that second time, and much closer. "Keep this door locked," John yelled at the Math teacher, and ran toward the sound.

As John rounded the corner at the end of the corridor, he saw a tall, dark figure in the door of Sue Owens' English classroom, pointing a shotgun inside. Just before John reached him, the figure turned, and John recognized him as Jon Romano, a student he knew had some serious issues. "Give me the gun," John Sawchuk commanded, and reached around Romano from behind to grab the barrel before Romano could fully turn on him.

Romano didn't make a sound. John could see that his finger was on the trigger, and he knew he didn't have much leverage because he was behind Romano and, even though he was six feet tall and built like a weightlifter, he was still a little shorter. He was surprised at how big and rangy this kid really was. Then, for a few seconds, Romano stopped struggling. John was trying to push the gun down from behind him, and the gun was pointed at the ground. *This thing goes off now, it's going to blind me or something. Where the hell is Mike?* John was thinking.

"Mike, help, help!" John yelled, and then he saw Mike coming down the hall. Romano lifted his head and saw Mike, too, and at that point, he tried to jack the gun up to shoot him. In John's mind, there was no question about what was happening. If he let this kid pull the gun up, Mike was probably dead. He strained to hold it down, but then he could feel his heart sink and he said, "No, please, no," as the gun suddenly went off in his hands.

The recoil from the shotgun and John's tugging on it had pushed him and Romano a few yards back, but John hadn't lost his grip on the gun. The last he saw, Mike dove into a classroom, so he figured he was okay – the shot must have missed him. But now Romano was really going nuts. Maybe he figured he had shot at students first and now a teacher, so what the hell. What did he have to lose, anyway? He might as well shoot at an Assistant Principal next. *Don't let go! Don't let go!* John kept telling himself, but he knew he only had a hold on the gun, not on the strong kid trying to haul it out of his hands and kill him.

Romano was yanking him back and forth, slamming him into the wall next to the Social Studies Office, and the barrel of the shotgun kept inching up toward him. John was thinking Mike would come out anytime now to help, and he yelled for him: "Help, help. Come on, help. Somebody, help me. Mike, Mike, help!"

Then John heard Mike answer, "I can't. I'm hit," and he thought, *Oh, shit, this is not going to end well.* In that instant, John began to talk to Romano again. "Come on, Jon, give it up. It's over with." And Jon answered, inexplicably, "Okay, okay," and he stopped struggling. After that, John Sawchuk was able to subdue Romano, pry the shotgun away from him, and drag him to the Social Studies Office, where other teachers finally unlocked the door and decided it was safe enough to help.

The actual crisis had occurred in ten minutes or less, but it set a firestorm of activity and drama into motion -- a school lockdown; local, rapid-response police squads storming the school with guns drawn; SWAT teams searching every square foot before anyone could leave; the New York State Police blocking the roads; agents from the FBI and ATF conducting interviews; EMTs and paramedics caring for the wounded; a District Attorney and her investigators starting their case; reporters from all major news media, hunting for information; and hundreds of terrified parents – all converging on a high school where frightened, confused staff and students held captive inside tried to understand what had just happened in a place they had always assumed was a safe haven.

Paradoxically, the toughest days for survivors like John and Mike are not the days of the actual shootings. The Superintendent of the East Greenbush Central School District, Terry Brewer, would later say, "Ten minutes of crisis results in ten months to a year of recovery." For John Sawchuk and Mike Bennett, that ten months to a year has stretched out to more than three years, and they're still counting.

"It wasn't so much that day of the incident, because what happened didn't really sink in, with all of the adrenaline that was flowing," John reveals, "but it was the day after, and the days that followed. The papers did a big story the next day, with a headline that said something about a gun and dreams of dying, like with that kid in Virginia. The police had found a suicide note that Romano left, naming people he wanted to kill at our school, and we didn't know anything about that until later. *Well, this thing happened, but Jon Romano didn't really want to hurt anybody -- that's what I had been thinking.* Then we read otherwise - that he had planned this, that he had these videos, that he was coming in to do damage to people and to kill people. It was all just very creepy. And all this was thrown at us that morning after."

Mike Bennett healed fairly quickly from the gunshot wound to his leg, and he tried to return to teaching on February 16, a week after the shooting. He made it through three days before he fell apart: "It was before the start of a class, and I started to walk down the hallway, and at that point I felt myself really getting ready to lose it - the anxiety of everything - and I was able to get outside the building and I started to walk to my car, and I lost it. I had a breakdown."

And at their high school, many colleagues continued to act either angry and resentful, because Mike and John kept being hailed as heroes, or avoided them out of guilt for failing to help them during the crisis. The result, of course, was more isolation and emotional pain at the most critical time. "The finger-pointing started, and there was a lot of anger," John recalls. "Some of the things that happened I just don't forget."

"For me, personally," Mike Bennett adds, when things finally settled down and other people started to move on with their lives, I couldn't. One of the things that I

know is you live it, and at Virginia tech they will all continue to live it, to some degree every day of their lives.”

Along with that reality, though, has come a hard-earned compassion for colleagues and the unexpected benefit of a more mature perspective: “I’ve always had an administrative position as a goal, and it’s great that I’m able to do it in this school district. Every day is also about silver linings now,” Mike continues, pulling up his plastic ID badge that holds a picture of his two young daughters. “It’s all about my girls, and my wife. Every day is a gift.”

John nods, and smiles. “We always talk about how lucky we were.”

Welcome to my *dhaba* - I'm Mike, your friendly *chaat wallah*!

It was probably the 30-30-30-10 rule that set the stage for Mike Gordon's food pilgrimage to Thailand last January: 30% food costs, 30% fixed expenses, 30% labor, and then 10% profit. That's the way the way the restaurant axiom was explained to him when he was a student at the Culinary Institute of America, the CIA, from 1988 to 1990. "If you do everything by the book, you make ten cents on the dollar," Mike explains. "Now if you tell me that you're making an investment of a hundred, maybe two hundred thousand dollars in a business, and where if you're lucky no one is stealing from you and none of the chefs is throwing meat away or putting it in the back of his car and nobody is taking money out of the register, you might make 10% profit, I'd say that's pretty tight. It's easy to lose that 10%."

So as Mike learned his trade for twenty years, rising from dishwasher to doing the pantry, from cook to culinary student, from sous chef to chef, first at L'Ecole in Albany, then Bavarian Chalet in Altamont, in the CIA, at Mariner's Harbor in Highland, and finally back in Albany at the Marriott, he took careful notes. And he realized one essential fact: most of the restaurants and food businesses that succeeded were either really big or really small. In a very competitive world, the independents in between - the mom and pop shops that can't advertise as much as the chains and can't bargain as strongly with distributors like Sysco or Ginsberg's - have a much steeper hill to climb.

None of that is a problem if you haven't known since you were eight years old that you wanted to be a chef, and if you didn't drop out of high school two months shy of graduation because you were offered your first full-time job as a cook, and if the need to create and serve exciting, innovative food isn't in your blood. But for Mike Gordon, who was in food for life and fantasized about owning his own place, it was a real problem. He solved it, inadvertently, by going broke and getting mobile.

In 1999, after a four-year stint as a salesman for Ginsberg's that allowed him to have regular hours and watch his two sons as they grew, the bottom dropped out of Mike's life. His marriage fell apart, he lost custody of his kids, he was struggling to overcome a drinking problem, and he was fired, all within a few months. Near the bottom of the downward spiral, though, Mike met someone who pulled him out of the tailspin. He and Susan, whose marriage was also on the rocks, fell instantly and crazily in love, and Mike moved to Keene Valley, in the Adirondacks, to live with her. So at least Mike was in love, but he was still broke and out of a job.

On a drive one day, Mike and Susan passed a well-known hot dog stand near Exit 30 of the Northway, and that sparked an incongruous thought for a CIA-trained chef like Mike: "You know, I could do that," he blurted out. "But I would do it with a fish fry." Turned out that Susan knew the hot-dog vendor - he was her mechanic - and he knew somebody with a 14-foot, fully-equipped, Art Deco, Airstream restaurant trailer for sale, and an old 1-ton Ryder moving van to carry supplies and pull the trailer, all for only \$16,000. Of course, that was sixteen grand that Mike didn't have, so Susan, who had been teaching music in Keene Valley for eleven years, volunteered to put the whole shot on her credit card - cash advance.

Up until then, for many of Keene Valley's 800 inhabitants, Mike had been the homewrecker, a *persona non grata*. After they tasted the food at his new stand, he quickly became "Mike Fish Fry." There's a big truck turnaround at the intersection of Routes 9N and 72, between Keene and Keene Valley, and that's where Mike set up. "I bought a big generator and I put it in the truck," Mike remembers. "I hung up Christmas lights, and I had a 500-watt halogen light bulb shining on the side of the Ryder truck, where I had *Mike's Fish Fry - One Bite and You're Hooked*. That was the name of the business. And you could see it -- with the logo of a guy fishing and hauling up a fish fry, like a billboard, because I angled it -- from a mile away. All the skiers would come off of Whiteface Mountain at 4:00, starving, and the word got out that there was home-cooked food at this little stop that was way cheaper and better than the food they could get at the mountain."

In no time at all, Mike's fish-fry business took off. Maybe it was the Icelandic haddock he used, or his secret, delicate breading, or his crabcake specials and homemade egg rolls. Whatever it was, it worked: Within a couple of months, he had paid back Susan's cash advance. He put some Astroturf down and installed a telescoped umbrella table. He hung plants. He bought some 70s-era vinyl bar stools at a garage sale and set them at the drop-down metal shelf so he could interact with the human parade as he cooked: "The different people who came to this stand were amazing - I had skiers, ice climbers, people visiting prisoners up at the federal prison in Raybrook, downstate city people perched next to AuSable Club patrons alongside truck drivers who parked their butts right next to whacked-out backwoods types -- all of humanity, all sitting there together, eating my fish fries."

After his first season, Mike added Indian food. He made a thick, tasty *dal*, spread it over chicken curry, and rolled it in a foil-wrapped tortilla so people could eat while they drove home. Pretty soon, the Indian wraps out-sold the fish fries. People just went nuts for them, and the ingredients were a lot cheaper than Icelandic haddock. So for the next two years, Mike sold both, testing Indian recipes and adding new dishes as he developed them.

Then in 2002, Susan's mom got sick, and Mike and Susan moved down to Greenwich to live with her father. That was okay with Mike - he'd be closer to his boys in Albany - but his regular spot in Keene was too far a commute. He couldn't find a new location for Mike's Fish Fry that clicked, so it was time for a change. Thunder Mountain Curry was born: Mike sold the Airstream, bought a portable cart, and started to sell Indian meals at the Troy Farmer's Market. His first week there, an RPI professor said to him, "You know, you really should come up and set up in front of the school. There are so many Indians up there."

Mike did some research and found out the City of Troy owned the sidewalk in front of Rensselaer's student center. Now he pays \$250 twice a year for his vendor permits, and sells as much as he can cook there. And except for one year in Uganda, where Susan taught in an embassy school and Mike ran an export business that

provided food for United Nations peacekeepers in the Congo, that's where Mike has been, weather permitting -- RPI during the week and the Farmer's Market on Saturdays.

Mike sold Indian food only for two years, and his Indian customers gave him their favorite recipes – special meals their families used to make at home for them, or finger food (*chaat*) from street vendors (*wallahs*) in their stands (*dhabas*), that they couldn't get here. Mike would greet them each day, "Welcome to my *dhaba* – I'm Mike, your friendly *chaat wallah*," and they loved it. Then Mike had an epiphany: "I said to myself, 'Why am I just doing Indian? There's a whole pan-Asian cuisine. I actually like Thai better, and I think many people prefer it. I decided I shouldn't just limit myself to Indian cooking.'" So Mike taught himself to cook Thai, using James Oseland's *Cradle of Flavor* and other excellent food books, served spring rolls and pad thai and corn fritters and Thai curries at his stand, and people couldn't get enough of his new Thai food, either.

But for Mike, there was something missing. He didn't want to just cook Thai food -- any decent cook could learn a few recipes – he wanted to truly understand the cuisine of Thailand, its "nuances," and to see its fabled street vendors in action. So he signed up for a cooking class in Chiang Mai, in northwestern Thailand, and learned their Chinese-influenced dishes. Then he traveled south to crowded, smelly, polluted Bangkok, where his eyes stung from the toxic air, but he bought beers and sat and observed the street vendors, mostly women who had no English at all, and became fascinated by their fluid movements as they cooked. He noted the dishes and watched the ingredients and quantities, but learned most from their agility and their preparation techniques.

However, a tip from an expatriate sent Mike off to the south of Thailand, past the trendy resort of Phuket, to Khojum, an island that you won't find in the guidebooks, and to an eight-day apprenticeship with "Mama," a rotund Thai woman in her 60s who wore a thick coat of white pancake make-up on her face and cooked like an angel. In Mama's kitchen, Mike found the same seasonings he buys from an

Asian market in Albany – Squid Brand Fish Sauce, Sriracha Chili Sauce, Healthy Boy Brand Soybean Paste – but he also discovered the nuance he had been looking for. Freshness. Brightness. Nuance. That’s what Mike learned with Mama in Thailand. He tries out different words for it as he moves around in the new kitchen he rents at the Arts Center of the Capital Region, chopping, stirring, pivoting, illustrating how Mama moved when she prepared her dishes, how she added tomatoes to her curry right before she served it, and finally acknowledges that his words aren’t nearly descriptive enough to capture the Zen of her cooking techniques and the flavor of her food.

“It wasn’t until I experienced Asian cuisine, and saw the complexity and the simplicity of it at the same time. You’re trying to keep the flavors nice and clean and uncomplicated. It’s multi-dimensional. European cuisine is two-dimensional: You can have a dish that’s either sweet or hot. You’re not going to get one that’s sweet and hot at once. Asian cuisine is different – it’s sweet, hot, salty, sour and bitter, all at the same time, though maybe not in a single bite. But if you have an Asian meal, you should have all of those flavors. And if you do it right, and you eat in balance, then you feel contentment, and you feel satisfaction after the meal.”

A few hours before Mike flew home, he took a nap in a Buddhist garden at the airport, next to the employees’ cafeteria. Even though he was a *firang*, a foreigner, the Thais who worked there let him eat with them. “I got a dollar’s worth of tickets and the whole lunch cost me about 60 cents. It was my last few hours in the country and I got to spend it eating this great food and spending time in a Buddhist garden. What a wonderful place to be. The food in that cafeteria was some of the best food I had in Thailand.”

Now that he’s back, Mike remembers that gesture of sharing, and tries to embody it in the way he serves his food. He’s still got his stand at the Farmer’s Market, and up at RPI, but he’s expanded into catering now as well and he needed a kitchen closer to his jobs. He remembers that 30-30-30-10 rule, though, and the expansion makes him a little nervous. “For the last few years, I had told customers that I would never own a restaurant,” Mike admits, “but I don’t say that much

anymore, because I think whenever you say you'll never do something, you end up doing that. Since I don't want a restaurant, I don't want to jinx myself. Being here, being in this commercial kitchen that's set up exactly the way that I want it set up, being surrounded by paintings and sculpture and theater and music, is really inspiring."

For now, Mike's Thunder Mountain Curry may be small enough to retain that elusive nuance and unique enough to survive on the streets. Mama would be proud.