

An  
Incident  
of  
School  
Violence  
in  
East  
Greenbush,  
New York

by

William B. Patrick

## Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| February 9, 2004: The Shooting .....  | 3   |
| Characters .....  | 93  |
| What People in the East Greenbush Central School District Learned<br>And What They Changed in the Days and Months<br>after the Incident .....         | 94  |
| Bibliography .....  | 139 |
| Appendices .....  | 142 |
| Appendix A: A Brief History of School Violence in America   |     |
| Appendix B: Witness Statements  |     |
| Appendix C: Defense Attorney's Affirmations & Jon Romano's<br>Handwritten Suicide Note  |     |
| Appendix D: A Letter from the Defense Attorney to the District Attorney,<br>& Court Records of the Plea & the Sentence                                |     |
| Appendix E: Memoranda & Summary of SAVE Committee Meetings &<br>Hank Kolakoski's Staff Response Letter to Terry Brewer                                |     |
| Appendix F: East Greenbush Central School District School Safety Plan<br>& An Overview of Project SAVE<br>& a Summary of Threat Assessment in Schools |     |
| Appendix G: Press Statements, Session Minutes, Chronology of the<br>Incident, Letters, Memos & School Maps  |     |
| Appendix H: Notes & Letters from Jon Romano<br>& Letters of Support from Lorraine Barde & Friends   |     |

## February 9, 2004: The Shooting

In most ways, Monday, February 9, 2004 at Columbia High School in East Greenbush, New York was a normal, school-year Monday. It was seasonally cold, around 18 degrees at dawn, and cloudy, but it was supposed to get up to the mid-30s by the afternoon. At least school had not been cancelled. The Friday before, a snowstorm had forced Terry Brewer, the Superintendent of the East Greenbush School District, to declare a snow day, so whatever class work was missed on Friday got pushed into Monday.

John Sawchuk, one of the Assistant Principals at Columbia, got up before 5 a.m., as he usually did, and went through his customary morning routine: Take a shower, eat breakfast, read the paper, leave the house about 5:50, drive in to school from Clifton Park so he could be at school by 6:25. Kids would start arriving at 7:00, and classes would start at 7:35, so John needed his drive time to think and plan, as well as the half hour before staff and kids arrived at school, to write down what he had to do for the day and to finish up whatever small paperwork jobs were left. A big part of an Assistant Principal's job is serving people, and John was dedicated to that job. Once staff arrived, his attention would shift to them -- he always had to factor in the time for the inevitable stream of daily referrals that would demand his presence. He was also in charge of discipline, and had a serious weightlifter's physique to underscore that role.

So the minute John arrived in his office, he went to his easel and wrote out his schedule for Monday, February 9. He had two slightly unusual tasks to fit in that morning. He had to make up an observation that had been originally set up for Friday the 6<sup>th</sup> with Nancy Van Ort, a Math teacher. It wasn't formally arranged, and he hadn't spoken with Nancy over the weekend to re-schedule it, but he was pretty sure she wouldn't have a problem with him just showing up to observe her.

The big thing on John's mind was the reporter from Channel 9 who was coming in to do a focus-on-education piece. John and Steve Leader, a Technology teacher at Columbia, had coordinated the donation of a plasma-cutting tool through the local Rotary Club, and Channel 9's reporter was supposed to show up about 9 a.m. to interview both John and Steve and to cover a demonstration with a number of students working on their projects with the new tool. That kind of public relations was important, and John had to coordinate all of the pieces that would make the event go smoothly before the reporter arrived.

\* \* \*

Across town, Lorraine Barde was getting ready to leave her home on Petalas Drive. She had an early meeting at the Veterans Administration Hospital that Monday morning, so she wanted to be on the road by 7:45. Lorraine decided she wouldn't wake her son, Jon Romano, before she left. Even though he was 16, Jon didn't have to get up early for high school anymore. He had been taking

classes at Hudson Valley Community College, and his first class on Mondays was at 10 a.m. She could wait and call to wake him after her meeting. Lorraine was feeling a lot less anxious about Jon that morning. Finally, after a really hard year, things seemed to be working out for him.

But about fifteen months before, in late November of 2002, Lorraine had begun to suspect that Jon was seriously depressed. "It was his sophomore year, middle of his sophomore year – right before Christmas," Lorraine remembered. "I had gotten a call. Jonny was not doing well in school. He had failed Math the year before, taken it in summer school and got in the 90s. But back in regular school, he was having trouble again with Math. We had been going over it every night, and he seemed to understand the process but he would have all these careless mistakes, you know. He was having problems in Biology, too, and I got a call from his Biology teacher and she said she was concerned about Jon because he wasn't doing well and he seemed . . . well, she didn't know whether he had a learning disability, or possibly depression."

That call had confirmed Lorraine's feelings. She had been worried about him for a long time. Jon's Biology teacher promised to contact a guidance counselor, and suggested that Lorraine try to do that also. Lorraine made some calls and left some messages, but she doesn't remember hearing back from anyone.

"In any case, a few days later I talked to his teacher again, or we were exchanging e-mails, but she hadn't been able to get down to the Counseling Office either, and she said that after Christmas, for sure, because she felt that Jon should be tested for any disabilities or whatever. In the meantime, well, we had Christmas,

and then school started up again, and it was probably only a week or two into that semester when I got a call from Jonny, from school, saying, 'Mom, could you please come get me, I can't take it anymore.' And I said, 'I'll be right there.' I went and picked him up and I asked him what was the matter, and he goes, 'Could you take me to the doctor? Is there something they can do to make me feel better?'"

After that, the medical roller coaster ride had begun. When Jon told his pediatrician he had entertained thoughts of suicide, the pediatrician suggested Celexa, an anti-depressant, for him. Celexa is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), like the better-known Prozac or Paxil, that is often prescribed in the treatment of depression, anxiety disorders and some personality disorders. SSRIs produce side effects, though, from less serious ones like drowsiness and headaches to scary ones like increased feelings of anxiety and suicidal ideation. The manufacturers of SSRIs fervently deny any link between the use of their legally prescribed drugs and suicidal tendencies, but many patients and their families have lodged accusations and instigated lawsuits during the last few years, claiming those serious side effects had led to suicides and wrongful deaths.

Scientific evidence for any link between SSRIs and suicide has been slow in coming and has been contradictory: Early in 2006, GlaxoSmithKline issued a press release that admitted an analysis of their clinical trial data had shown a statistically higher incidence of suicides in patients who had been taking Paxil (one of their SSRIs) than with a placebo, but a separate study released in November of 2006 concluded that SSRIs actually lower suicide rates in children.

In any case, Jon's pediatrician had declared those side effects were rare and had started him off on a low dose. Lorraine wanted a second opinion, and made an appointment with a psychologist, who diagnosed Jon with major, clinical depression, and speculated that he had probably been suffering with it for a couple of years, at the very least. He supported the use of the SSRI, and Jon began taking it.

At the same time, Lorraine had begun to meet with Tim Crannell, one of Columbia High School's Assistant Principals, to reduce Jon's workload at school and to change his schedule. Though the school seemed accommodating at first, as far as she was concerned, that didn't last long: "So then I called the guidance department back to see if they had reduced his workload, and they refused, 'Oh, we never said we would agree to that. We didn't say that. We could re-arrange his schedule, but we never said we could reduce his workload.' They brought up home tutoring again at that point. This was at the beginning of March. And Jonny and I, neither one of us really wanted it, but we said fine, because he just wasn't being able to go to school. I wrote a letter on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, mailed it the next day, and that was the day, on my way into work, when I got a call from Jonny's psychologist, saying, '*I just got a FAX from the school. I think he's a danger to himself, and I don't think he should be alone.*' I turned around and I didn't even go into work. I hadn't even made it. I turned around and went home."

Jon ended up in Four Winds, a private psychiatric hospital in Saratoga Springs, for a week, and then spent the rest of that school year being tutored at home. He got an IEP, an individual education plan, in June, which allowed him to drop some courses he was failing and to extend his graduation date for two more

years, but that didn't seem to help much either. Jon missed classes, skipped school, and often behaved badly when he was there. And when he started up again in the Fall, it got even worse. He had panic attacks when he was at school, and had his medications switched several times.

So by October 30, 2003, when Jon turned 16, Lorraine had decided to pull him out of school. They visited Hudson Valley Community College to enroll him there, but learned he couldn't officially leave high school until the end of the school year in which he had turned 16. That was eight months away. However, Hudson Valley did say he could take classes there in the Continuing Education Department, and Jon could start there in January. The counselor there, Barry Anderson, talked to Jon about setting him up for success, and rekindling his love of learning. As Jon and his mother walked out of Hudson Valley, Jon said to her, "You know, Mom, I like it here. They find solutions."

Just three weeks later, Lorraine recalled, by Thanksgiving of that year, Jon seemed like a new person. "When we were at my brother's house and my sister-in-law's family was there and everything, Jon said, 'Can I say the blessing?' Even I was surprised that he asked to do that, and it was beautiful, something like, 'When I'm hungry, let me remember those who don't have food.'"

So on Monday, February 9, 2004, after her meeting, as Lorraine left the VA Hospital and headed toward her car, she wasn't worried about Jon. She had even forgotten that her sister, who usually drove him to Hudson Valley for his morning classes, was out of town. She called Jon from her car about 8:45 a.m. and he told her, "Yeah, I'm awake, Mom. I'm awake." And she said, "Okay, I'm heading to work. I'll



see you later.” Jon had answered, “Okay, I love you.” What Jon didn’t tell her was that he had been up since about 8 a.m., writing a suicide note, telling some people he was sorry.

It was a long note, and a rambling one, and by the end, it seemed like more than a suicide note. The first, dense paragraph combined desperate speculation with festering complaints from the past, and the tone seemed composed for some unspecified media release:

*I’m just too afraid of the future. I could do all I’ve planned, but then what if some bum gets a gun and shoots me? What if there’s a huge war? What if terrorists strike and I lose family? What if some fuck up kidnaps me, rapes me, tortures me, then kills me? Too much I’m afraid of. I’ve had issues the majority of my life. I still do, obviously. But I hoped I would get better and become a state trooper. I don’t ask for help, because what if I get better, then can’t be a cop? That’s all I want to do. But now I’m just too afraid. I believe whatever I believe will happen in the after-life, will happen. When I die I’m going to heaven. I’m NOT A MONSTER. I’ve been happy for a while, but it wasn’t true happiness, I just made it seem that way. Who should you blame? SOCIETY. My mom wanted to believe I was better, and I made it seem that way. Dr. Mooney couldn’t even see this coming. Christina just thought maybe suicide. Oh YEA, blame Four Winds. Those bastards were horrible. I faked my happiness to get out. My dad treated my family like shit, back in the day. Now he’s better, but the past hurts. He also told me I had no way of being a fireman when I was about ten or eleven.*

Then Jon shifted direction and went on to directly address a list of his family members. He told his mother he loved her, that she had treated him like a King, and reassured her that it wasn’t her fault. He accused his father of beating him and his half-brother, Matt, and wished him “a few good years.” He bid goodbye to his half-siblings – Jay, Matt, and Rachel – thanking them and expressing his love. And Jon proceeded on down the list of cousins, aunts,

uncles, and friends, remembering specific good times with each and wishing them all well, until he wrote: *I want you to know I'm not an evil person. I don't want you to look back and think that I was. In a few years, I hope you'll start to understand. To all other family – I'm sorry.* (The suicide note is reproduced in its entirety, typed, in Appendix G, and as a handwritten copy in Appendix C.)

After that, the note turned ugly. Jon named several people at Columbia High School that he hated, among them Assistant Principal Tim Crannell, and then said he was going to watch *Bowling for Columbine*. On the final page, apparently after he finished watching the movie, Jon returned to his media tone and asked a question -- *How am I different than what the media says school shooters are?* He listed TV shows and movies he liked to watch, offered an explanation about why whatever he was planning to do was Columbia's fault, and ended with a statement about what he had done that morning: *Woke up, watched some of the Today show, saw the 'Where in the world is Matt Lauer' thing. Then I got some Cheerios, took a shower, and now it's time to get ready.*

\* \* \*

Deborah Garcia, the Channel 9 news reporter, was late. She showed up around 9:30, and John Sawchuk brought her down to Steve Leader's metal shop. John sat and watched for almost an hour, until classes were about to change. Steve seemed to have everything under control. As John was leaving,

he told him, "Make sure if anybody else speaks or gives an interview that you give me their names so I can contact their parents."

Next, John stopped at his office and let his secretary know he was on his way to make up that observation, and went on up to Nancy Van Ort's 5<sup>th</sup> period Math class. Columbia schedules a nine-period day of 40-minute classes, with 5 minutes to change classes, starting at 7:35 a.m. and ending at 2:15 p.m. As John took a seat at the front of Nancy's class, he noticed she had about 25 students that morning -- a full classroom. What John Sawchuk didn't know at that moment was that Jon Romano was holding a shotgun in the boys' bathroom down the hall.

\* \* \*

25 minutes earlier, at about 10:10 a.m., Jon Romano had parked his mother's white Ford F-150 in the faculty parking lot near the football field. Wearing a black leather jacket, he walked to the school's main entrance and went in. He was carrying a hard, black case and a backpack, and he moved nonchalantly past the Main Office to a stairway that led to the third and fourth floors of the South Tower, although on the school maps they were recorded as the second and third floors of the South Forum.

Perhaps because Jon's was a familiar face at the high school, he was able to stroll in, unquestioned, without signing in late, and without having his hard, black case examined. There were no metal detectors at the entrance, and no

security guards detaining or questioning students. Since its beginning, Columbia had taken pride in being a welcoming and inclusive educational environment, and Jon probably counted on that to help make his plan work. In any case, he was able to climb a flight of stairs, proceed down a hallway, and then enter the boys' bathroom without being stopped by anyone. On his way to the bathroom, he had spied Bill Telasky, a popular substitute teacher, sitting inside 331, a Social Studies classroom, but Bill didn't see him. Even though his shotgun was already loaded with 5 Winchester Super X heavy game loads, Jon decided not to go for him. He liked Mr. T. He was a good teacher. He remembered everybody's name.

Jon's half-brother, Matt, who was nine years older than Jon, was stationed in Iraq in February of 2004, and the two had been e-mailing back and forth for months. Occasionally, depending specifically on where Matt was in Iraq, they had even been able to instant message each other. Matt was scheduled to return home in the Spring, and he had been promising Jon they would go deer hunting the following Fall. Near the end of January, Jon talked to his psychologist about the hunting idea, and got the green light for it from him.

When Jon's mom, Lorraine, heard about the idea, she was hesitant at first, but Jon told her he had talked with his psychologist about it, and so she went in and talked with him herself. "I was in there after one session, you know, because sometimes he would just call me to kind of bring me up to date. And he said, 'Yeah, Jon's doing good. He told me he wants to go hunting with

Matt,' and I was about to say, 'Is this okay?' and he said, 'That will be so nice for them to be able to do stuff together.' So he was not pulling me aside like he was when he was saying Jonny would be getting a fresh start at school, pulling me in alone and saying, 'This is not going to happen; this is not good.' He was giving it his seal of approval." So a couple of weeks later, on February 7, a Saturday, Lorraine thought she would surprise Jon with a present.

"So I was out doing some errands on Saturday morning and I was over in Latham, because I had gone to see my mother, and I was in Dick's Sporting Goods for something and I went back and was looking at the shotguns, because I had been thinking that when Jon was going to be doing the hunting, I figured well, a couple of times I had done trap shooting, back in the 70s, skeet shooting, and I figured, *Well, this could be something then, we could go target shooting, there isn't a whole lot a mother and a 16-year old son can do together.* I did not want him to be going hunting without getting training. At that point, my biggest concern with him going hunting was all the stuff you read about where hunters get killed because of carelessness of other hunters."

They couldn't answer many of Lorraine's questions over at Dick's, so she stopped at the East Greenbush Police Station on her way home and asked if she needed to get a special license for Jon to use a shotgun for hunting. "I asked the police officer at the front there, and he said, 'I don't know,' and he was looking up on this chart and calling somebody else and asking, 'Do they need to get a special license?' and the other guy answered, 'I don't know.' Then he

said, 'Stop by the Pistol Parlor,' and I said okay, because it was on my way home, and that's what I did."

Lorraine admitted she wasn't really intending to buy the shotgun that day, that all she actually wanted was information, but the Pistol Parlor was going out of business and the salesman was really nice to her, so she thought, *Okay, I'll get one here. They're able to explain more about the shotguns to me here. They're more help than I'd be getting at one of the other places.* So Lorraine went home and got Jon, and then they went back together to the Pistol Parlor. She wanted Jon to hold the gun, to feel it, because they were both going to be using it.

Once Jon held it, he became even more excited about the shotgun, and Lorraine decided to buy it. She bought a case for it, too, and told the salesman that she and Jon might go target shooting that coming week, and she needed him to recommend some appropriate ammunition. "Oh, for target shooting, you get light shot," he said, and pulled down a box of birdshot with 25 rounds inside.

Then Lorraine asked him to show her how to load the gun. It was true that she had done some skeet shooting at a hunting club when she was younger, so she had loaded shotguns before, but that was almost thirty years ago. He looked puzzled, and asked her, "Well, you're going to read the directions first, aren't you?"

"Of course," she told him, "but I also visually like to see, you know," and the salesman gave her and Jon a brief demonstration.

Who knows what Jon was thinking as he sat inside the stall on the third floor of the South Tower at Columbia High School? But he sat there, waiting and thinking and remembering, for about fifteen minutes, so he heard the silence in the hallway outside for a few minutes before the bell that signaled end of 4<sup>th</sup> period classes, and the inevitable opening of classroom doors and the rush of students hurrying to other rooms, and the immediate, clamorous swell of kids' voices – maybe even a few voices he might have recognized – and then a couple of boys came into the bathroom. The gun was loaded, sitting across his lap. Was that the right time? Should he stick the barrel in his mouth at that moment and get the damned thing over with, or was he imagining what he would look like after he pulled the trigger? Did he envision the boys kicking the stall door in and screaming for a teacher when they saw him sprawled out, all bloody from the blast? Or did he think about what his mother and Matt and everyone else would feel like when they heard what he had done?

Whatever he thought, Jon didn't shoot himself in that stall. The boys left the bathroom, and Jon would have heard the bell announcing the start of 5<sup>th</sup> period classes, then probably a few late students running and, finally, another silence. Maybe he was remembering the people he put in his suicide note. Was he mentally locating Assistant Principal Tim Crannell, whom he had called a liar in the note, or Mrs. Greer, whom he identified as a bitch there, or some of the other unnamed "friends and people I hate?" Mr. Kzuzdal, Columbia's Principal, wasn't in the note, but Jon hated him as much as anybody. Kzuzdal had no respect for him. He had lied to Jon, too. Maybe Jon should find him first

and then find the others. This was a point of no return, no matter what. Jon knew that much, anyway.

But then if he didn't go after the administrators, there was the problem of which classroom he should enter first. As soon as he left the bathroom, there were four rooms in a line – 321, 319, 317, and 315. 321 was Mr. Zilgme's class, that was closest, but there weren't any kids there. That left Ms. Shanley's 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English class in 319, where she was teaching a novel called *The Contender* that morning, about a boxer who punches his way out of Harlem, or Ms. Owens' 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies class in 317, or Room 315 at the other end of the hall – Ms. Way's single-semester Modern Literature class with a bunch of seniors she had only seen three or four times so far this semester. Jon remembered Ms. Way. She wasn't so bad. When he had her for 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English, she had started them out like she actually cared about them, asking them to complete questions like

*I need a teacher who . . .*

or

*I bring to this class . . .*

or

*We read because . . .*

He had sat in the second row, and Ms. Way had looked at him like he was okay, like he was just a regular student, not judging him like most of the other teachers did. She looked at him like she thought he was sad, maybe, which he was a lot of the time, but not like he was crazy or violent, and she had



talked to his mom at parent-teacher conferences and she'd been really nice to her, too. Ms. Way always quoted writers, and said things like, "We read to discover we're not alone," and weird stuff like that which Jon secretly sort of liked. So maybe he wouldn't go into Ms. Way's room.

And what about his friends? He didn't want to hurt anybody he cared about. So Jon pulled out his cell phone and sent a text message to Brad Whisher, Jen Hudder, and Mike Russell: I'M IN SCHOOL WITH SHOTGUN. GET OUT. They were his friends. He had to warn them.

Then Jon stepped out of the stall and went to a sink. He was sweating. He laid the gun across the sink and began to wash his hands.

Outside, down the hall from the bathroom, Jeff Kinary and Casey Steponik were on their way to lunch. They were dumping their books in their lockers when Eric Farrell, who had a pass to go to the bathroom, called to them. Jeff and Casey followed Eric toward the bathroom.

Inside, suddenly, Jon heard the door to the bathroom open and he grabbed the shotgun. It was Eric Farrell, but Jon didn't know him. He was just some white kid. Jon didn't say a word. He raised the shotgun and pointed it at Eric. "Don't do this, man," Eric blurted out. Then he turned around and blocked Jeff and Casey from entering. "Fuck this," he yelled at them, and bolted past.

Next door, in Classroom 321, Pete Zilgme, a Social Studies teacher who had been teaching at Columbia for almost 17 years, heard a student bellow out some profanity. He didn't have any students that period, so from where he sat,

at his desk, he shouted “Hey, watch your mouth,” and Eric Farrell suddenly ran into the classroom. Jeff and Casey, who had not seen Jon or the shotgun, watched Eric zip into Mr. Zilgme’s room. On instinct, they began to walk away from the bathroom.

Jon Romano followed Eric out, but Eric had already disappeared into Mr. Zilgme’s room. Jon did see Jeff and Casey, though, moving away down the hallway toward the stairs. “Oh, shit,” Jon said. 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 and then ran past the Social Studies Office and toward the stairwell. He could see Casey running just ahead of him, and then another shot exploded into the wall beside Casey’s legs. “A kid has a gun,” Casey was shouting as he leapt down the stairs, with Jeff shouting, “He shot at us! He shot at us!” right behind him. They ran as fast as they could, afraid to even look behind them, but Jon wasn’t following them.

\* \* \*

When he heard the first blast in the hallway outside Nancy Van Ort’s classroom, John Sawchuk thought something might have blown up in the metal shop. They had all those tractors up on tables and everything, and it

sounded like it could have been a gas explosion. *That means Steve Leader and all those kids, right in the middle of the demonstration for the Channel 9 reporter – oh, my God,* John thought. All the kids in Nancy’s class immediately looked to John for an answer. “I’m going to check this out,” he told them. “I’ll be right back.”

When John stepped out into the hallway, he heard another explosion, but this was really close.

Two doors down, Mike Bennett, a 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Education teacher, stepped out to see what was happening, too. There was a lot of construction going on at Columbia then, and with the first blast, Mike just figured the construction workers were banging on steel or maybe some beams fell off a truck outside -- something expected like that. To Mike, the second sound was a little less muffled, but it seemed about the same as the first – maybe even an angry kid slamming a locker too hard down at the Orange Lockers section – though he did think it was weird the sounds had come only a few seconds apart. John turned to Mike and said, “That sounded like a gunshot.” By then, there were a number of kids who were walking around, so John told Mike, “Grab those kids and bring them in the classroom, and then come with me. We’ll find out what this was.” Before he left, John stepped back into Nancy’s class and said, “Keep this door locked.”

\* \* \*

After the first shot, Pete Zilgme thought somebody had set off an M-80 in the hall, but Eric Farrell said, "He's got a gun," and Pete stood up fast from his desk. Then he heard the second shot explode and he saw a student walk by his classroom holding a pump shotgun, with both hands, hip-high. Pete was a hunter; he knew guns. The student was a big kid - 6 feet 2 or 3, with brown hair, wearing glasses, in a dark leather coat - and he looked in at Pete as he went by. Pete looked back, and then remembered he didn't have the key to Room 321, so he quickly closed the door and pushed a table and bookcase in front of it.

Now Jon Romano headed for 319, Liz Shanley's English classroom. 10<sup>th</sup> Grader Travis Ellis was inside, and he heard the two blasts out in the hallway, and he knew they were gunshots. Ms. Shanley told all the students to hurry up and get behind her desk, which was as far away from the door as they could get quickly. Travis lay on the floor next to the desk. Some kids were crying; some were trying not to make any sounds at all. All of them were huddled together on the floor, and then Travis heard someone kick the door open. After that, he caught the sound of a gun being cocked, and he peered around the desk. Travis knew this kid. His name was Jon, but Travis didn't know his last name -- it was some kind of Italian name, and he had gone out with Travis' friend, Christina Izzo. That's all he knew. But now this Jon kid was walking into his English classroom, holding a shotgun with two hands across his body.

Jon stopped and looked around the classroom. Ms. Shanley was still standing, and when Jon stared at her, she screamed. A long AAAHHHHHH of

a scream that turned everything after it into a deeper quiet. But right after that, for no reason Travis could see, Jon just turned and walked out of the classroom. And then Ms. Shanley immediately ran to the door, slammed it closed, and locked it. In the hallway, Jon moved down the hall toward 317, Sue Owens' room.

\* \* \*

John Sawchuk was running, or at least moving pretty fast, as he remembers, toward whatever those blasts were. He figured Mike Bennett would get those kids back in the room quickly and then be following right behind him. The hallway was empty in front of him, but as he rounded the corner near Pete Zilgme's room, he saw a tall, dark figure leaning partway into a room. John couldn't tell who it was, but whoever it was had on a mid-length leather coat. He was a large guy, that was clear, with very long arms, and he was definitely holding a big, scary gun -- what looked to John like a shotgun -- waist-high, and he was standing kind of sideways, pretty much with his back to John. With the way he was facing, and with the fact that he was peering into the classroom, John figured he might not see the Assistant Principal sneaking up on him.

But suddenly the figure turned and looked behind him, and in that second, John recognized who it was -- he knew Jon Romano; he had worked with him quite a bit when Jon was a freshman, and Jon had never really gotten

into too much trouble that year. Because he was a big boy, he wasn't the one who got picked on very often.

There had been that one incident, though, last year, where Jon Romano had a friend who had gotten in some trouble with older kids and Jon had acted as an enforcer for him. On that occasion, John Sawchuk had said to him, "Jon, you know, you can't be making threats and getting involved with people in that way, but Jon didn't say anything. He just sat in Mr. Sawchuk's office, with this dead look in his eyes, just looking right through him, and Mr. Sawchuk, trying to reach him, had pressed a little. "Do you understand what I'm talking about, Jon?" And Jon finally answered, without any expression coming to his face, "Are you done with me?"

At least now, as Jon Romano turned and saw Mr. Sawchuk coming up fast behind him, a look of shock registered on his face. The fact that Jon had displayed an identifiable human reaction wasn't much of a consolation for John Sawchuk, though, because now he knew who it was, and he knew as well as anyone that this kid had a lot of serious issues.

John reached underneath him, quickly, before Romano could turn, and grabbed the stock and the barrel of the shotgun. Even though he was plenty strong, he was probably two or three inches shorter than this kid, and he figured at a bare minimum that Romano had a load of adrenaline coursing through him, and who knew what else. "Jon, give me the gun," he commanded. He didn't think Romano would give it up that easily; he really

just wanted to hold on until Mike Bennett showed up and helped him wrestle Romano to the floor.

At least the hallways were clear, thank God. Two shots had already been fired, so people were either cowering in the classrooms or locking their doors or getting the hell out of the building, if they could. But Romano had started to struggle, and they had worked their way a few yards to the side, dancing backwards in a kind of desperation waltz to right outside of the Social Studies Office.

Romano didn't speak. He didn't make a sound. John could see that Romano's finger was on the trigger, and he knew he didn't have much leverage because he was behind him, and a little shorter. He was surprised at how big and rangy Romano really was. A few thoughts, all in a rush, were going through his head: *You do what you do when a kid gets in a fight -- you try to tie him up until you get some help; You know you hope that you can reason with him and everything is going to be fine; I can try to kick his legs out and I'm going to get shot or he's going to land on me and it's not going to go well.*

Then, for a few seconds, Romano stopped struggling. John was pushing down on the gun 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?*

"Mike, help, help!" John started to shout, 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. His heart dropped and he said, "No, no, please, no," as the gun suddenly went off in his hands.

Just across the hallway, in Room 317, Sue Owens had sent her 24 students to the front of the room right after the second shot. With the first shot, she wasn't sure, "Because sometimes you think it's the fireworks that they bring back from North Carolina, that they're not supposed to have, and one goes off - like a cherry bomb - but this was the loudest noise I had ever heard. Then all of a sudden we heard the second one, and now I knew something wasn't right. Whatever was happening in that hall was not good."

Her classroom door was still open -- Sue always kept it open -- so she shouted, "Get away from the door," and then herded the kids behind the two desks and the computer station and told them to "Get up front. Get behind. Get wherever you can get."

Sue knew from her training, from all those drills over the years, that she had to get her door closed to make the room her safe space. But that wasn't so easy: the door was across a threshold that, as she crossed it to close the door, would leave her completely vulnerable to the hallway. She could try to tiptoe, though, and as she started across, BLAM! - the third shot exploded, and Mike Bennett flew into her classroom. "He just flew in, like he was going to second base, the way you see Derek Jeter does, he just flew into my room, and scared the \_\_\_\_ out of me."

"I'm hit," Mike yelled. "Help me."



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 had 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 thinking, 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 shoot him.

John Sawchuk had never been a hunter, and he didn't know anything about guns. Romano had fired three times, up to then, so what did that mean? Did he have two or three shots left in the gun? Was a round already fixed in the chamber, automatically, or did he have to pump something to make it ready to fire again? John had no idea, and things were getting out of hand.

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 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 good.*

In that instant, for no explainable reason, John began to talk to Romano again. "Come on, Jon, give it up. It's over with." And Jon said, "Okay, okay," and he stopped struggling.

*All right, now what's going to happen? Is this a trick? But Romano had actually stopped, and they were just standing there, quietly, in the hallway. John was still behind him, with his hands on the gun, and he was trying to figure out what to do next. Is he going to turn on me? Does he have another gun? Now, should I let go? How can I get away from him if I let go?*

But then Romano let go of the gun himself. John squatted down with it, fast, and then flipped it around so he could control it. Romano just stood there, waiting for what would happen next. He could easily have run away, or turned around and started to struggle with John again, but he didn't. John transferred the gun to his left hand alone, and he tripped Romano's legs out from under him. He went immediately to the floor. Bill Telasky ran over and John handed the gun to him. "Here, take this and get it out of here," John told him.

With his knee firmly on Romano's back, John pushed him along the floor to the Social Studies Office. He hammered on the door and yelled for whomever was inside to open up, but nobody came to the door. John could hear people whispering inside. "Come on, open up! Open the door, it's Mr. Sawchuk," he shouted.

"How do we know it's Mr. Sawchuk?" a voice answered.

"Open the goddamned door!" John demanded.

When the door finally opened, John and Bill Telasky dragged Romano into the office. They kept him face-down on the floor, and John sat on his back. "All right, don't go anywhere, because I don't know if this kid is going to flip

out again,” John told the teachers inside the office, and he started to go through Romano’s pockets.

John found ten shotgun shells in one pocket, and then ten more in another pocket. Those twenty, along with the five that Jon Romano had loaded into the gun at home, made up the contents of the box that the Pistol Parlor had sold to his mother about 48 hours before.

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Any other school day, Hank Kolakoski would have been right in the middle of the shooting, because he always ate his lunch in the Social Studies Office during 5<sup>th</sup> period. But on that particular morning, he had misplaced his car keys and at the start of 5<sup>th</sup> period, he walked downstairs to the Main Office to see if anyone had turned them in. Jeff Kinary and Casey Steponik, the first two people that Jon Romano had shot at, had just been talking to him at the end of Hank’s 4<sup>th</sup> period class, asking about a homework assignment they had to make up, and Hank was the one who wrote them a pass to go have lunch in the cafeteria. They were on their way to eat when they ran into Eric Farrell near their lockers and followed him toward the bathroom.

When Hank Kolakoski got to the Main Office, Assistant Principal Tim Crannell asked him, “Why are people bailing out of the south end of the building?” Hank taught Social Studies, United States History, and Psychology at Columbia High School, but he was also District Safety Coordinator for East

Greenbush Central School District. "Well, I don't know, but we better find out, though," Hank answered.

Hank and Tim started down the hall to see what the problem was. At that moment, one of the monitors turned a corner and came running into the hallway, yelling, "Get out of the building. There's a man with a gun." And Hank said, "Well, we're not leaving the building. We're going to get him out of the building." Hank turned to Tim and said, "Let's get the plans activated."

So Tim started his emergency telephone calls -- the East Greenbush Police, Superintendent Terry Brewer, Principal Mike Kzuzdal, who was out of the building that morning -- and Hank went to the PA system and called for the lockdown: *This is the main office. This is an emergency lockdown. Everyone is to go into lockdown immediately.* Hank thought about saying, *This is not a drill,* but he didn't want to cause a panic.

A lockdown was serious enough. The school often announced surprise fire drills, but not surprise lockdowns. Usually, they gave ample notice about lockdown drills, just so people wouldn't panic. A lockdown was the most severe action that Columbia High School could take to deal with an incident, and everybody knew it. The school day, as people had planned and scheduled it, was finished -- all classes, programs, activities, clubs, after-school sports -- everything was immediately cancelled for that day. A lockdown was the emergency step taken prior to evacuating the school, and it meant that everybody was to get into a secure area, lock the doors behind them, and then they had to do certain, specific things -- keep everybody calm; listen; try to keep

up the senses, so they would know if they had to make any adjustments, that type of thing. If they were in a room and they seemed to be okay, they were supposed to put the little green tag in the window, which meant that they were in that room and they were essentially okay. The other side of the tag has an X on it, so if they left the room, say, and went out a window, they were supposed to put the X on so that administrators and police officers would know they had exited that particular room.

After he repeated the lockdown announcement, Hank told the staff in the Main Office to lock themselves in, and he and Tim hurried up to the area where the monitor said the shooter was. Hank didn't have a gun or anything but, "You get very possessive," he admitted. "You know, teachers are very possessive - it's their school, it's their room, it's their kids. And as much as you get mad at kids, or kids get mad at you, if you're not there for the day, it's, 'Where were you yesterday?' And you might think, 'Well, you don't like me anyway, kid,' but that kid will say, 'You're my teacher and you weren't supposed to be out. We had a substitute, and you weren't here.'"

Apart from that healthy aspect of feeling possessive, and separate from the District Safety Coordinator duties that Hank took so seriously, he also had a father's motivation - one of his daughters attended Columbia, and Hank was intent on making sure she was all right, too.

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At 10:35 a.m. on February 9, 2004, the first of many 911 calls that originated at Columbia High School was received at the East Greenbush Police Department's (EGPD) Communications Center. Land-line 911 calls that originate anywhere in East Greenbush are answered directly by the EGPD. Cell phone 911 calls go to different emergency call centers. That first call was from the Main Office at Columbia, and the caller said that someone had been shot there and requested police and an ambulance immediately. The police dispatcher interrogated the caller, according to protocol, and relayed additional information to the responding units. Everybody knew exactly what the plan was that morning.

The Police Department and the School District in East Greenbush had a long and cooperative history. Beginning in 1985, they had instituted a cops-in-schools program named Project Team, where administrators from the school district cross-trained with EGPD officers on Long Island in ways to address serious teenage problems. Project Team was an original EGPD program staffed by volunteer officers like Joe DeSeve, and it evolved after a couple of years into D.A.R.E. – drug abuse resistance education.

“This was a 17-week curriculum,” East Greenbush Police Chief Chris Lavin explained, “that was invented, written, and copyrighted by the Los Angeles School District, with the idea that if a role model person were to deliver formatted lessons on self-esteem, drug prevention, and non-violent alternatives to problem solving to all 5<sup>th</sup> Graders in a school district, that it would reduce bad things like teen suicides and prevent things like

experimenting with drugs later on. They were trying to cut into the cycle of violence that seems to begin to breed at that age. The Los Angeles School District made it available to the rest of the educational community in America by selling licenses for school districts to collaborate with local police departments, so police became the designated role models to deliver these messages.”

After Columbine, the school tragedy in Littleton, Colorado in April of 1999, where a teacher and twelve students were massacred by two teenage boys, police departments all over the country studied what had happened there so they could prevent a similar occurrence in their own communities. Prior to Columbine, the tactic was to arrive, set up an outer perimeter, then create an inner perimeter, and wait for SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) -- let the specially-trained, better-armed officers make the entry. That was the well-documented plan in place in most urban centers and in most metropolitan areas. That’s what the police did. They didn’t send lesser-armed police officers into critical situations like school shootings or hostage crises. But what happened at Columbine - the fact that some people who might have been saved by different police tactics actually died there -- that certainly changed things.

The National Tactical Officers Association, a SWAT organization, came up with a controversial technique that didn’t wait for any SWAT teams, and didn’t even use their personnel. It was called the Immediate Rapid Deployment

Plan (IRDP), and it was designed specifically to respond to shootings that occur in workplace environments.

IRDP was and is controversial for a couple of reasons: firstly, because the first four cops who arrive at a scene, no matter what uniform they're wearing, form a contact team, enter the building, ignore anyone wounded, and go for the shooter; and secondly, because ordinary patrol officers initiate it. This was not a wait-for-twenty-minutes-for-SWAT-to-show-up technique, and plenty of day-shift cops and their union representatives complained and litigated because they felt it was unfair that they had to now go for the bad guys and expose themselves to the likelihood of exchanging gunfire with a perpetrator. But no cops in East Greenbush complained about it. EGPD was quick to adopt the technique, and they had a critical incident plan in place a couple of years before New York State's SAVE legislation was enacted.

Chief Lavin underscored their essential strategy of staying proactive: "Long before Jon Romano came along, we had been dealing with kids in trouble and working with the school district, planning, planning, planning, every year planning, updating the plan every year, meeting with the school every year. We send members of our SWAT team to meet with teachers during the couple of days of staff orientation before school begins. And every teacher gets a 45-minute block with our SWAT team, and these guys have a Power Point presentation and they explain that, if there's a critical incident in the school, it's very important that the staff follow their lockdown procedures. As a matter of fact, the State Police and the State Education Department called us,



and they ended up using East Greenbush Central School's emergency plan as a road map when they came up with the SAVE legislation guidelines."

So on the morning of February 9, the dispatcher at EGPD notified not only its own officers, but also contacted adjoining police departments for mutual aid and alerted the New York State Police. Police from all over the Capital Region sped toward Columbia High School.

"IRDP worked great at Columbia," Chris Lavin remembered. "I was the last guy, humping up the stairs. I was number four. We were kind of poorly organized – the guys saw me coming in and they went in before I was even there, and we had an unmarked guy with us. Detective Joe DeSeve was there, and he wasn't in uniform. I was in uniform and there were at least two other uniforms, and it was cool, because we went humping up the stairs, and the victim was laying in the hallway, and he was bleeding and people were screaming and everything else.

"It was great: the cops jumped right over him, didn't look twice. Didn't look twice, you know. It was, like, it was working. They did their jobs. They jumped right over the wounded guy, didn't pay any attention to him. He was screaming, and there were people trying to drag him into a classroom. At least, when I got there, they were trying to drag him.

"But it was good to see the guys were going, as poorly organized as we were. We should have been better organized. You're supposed to go stealthfully, you know. But we knew what was going on. There was a janitor

who met us at the door and he pointed to the staircase where we had to go up and said, 'Upstairs. He's got a rifle. He's got a gun.'"

There were several people who pointed out the way, from the main entrance and down the hallway and up the stairs to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the South Tower, detailing the route for the responding police officers. Students and staff pointed and shouted, "He's down there. It's that way." And by the time the officers reached the Social Studies Office, they found Jon Romano on the floor, lying on his belly, with John Sawchuk sitting on him. Bill Telasky was holding the shotgun. So the most dangerous work was ostensibly over. The officers handcuffed Jon Romano, and they ejected the remaining rounds from the shotgun to make it safe, and they began Step 1 of their investigation.

Step 1 assumes a concept designated as Plus One. "Plus One is the technique officers are trained to use when they make a felony traffic stop," Chief Lavin revealed. "A felony traffic stop would be stopping a stolen car, stopping a car that's wanted in the commission of a crime, or is occupied by a fugitive. Plus One means that of all of the people that you know about - of all the people that you can, for example, see in the stolen car -- you consider that there may be at least one additional person. So even after you've hollered for everybody to get out of the car, and everyone is out that you can see, before you walk up and expose yourself to being ambushed, you consider that there's one other person in the car, hiding. So you do the same thing in a shooting situation."

Step 1 then becomes a thought process that leads to the multiple tasks of Step 2: Maintain the lockdown; remove the weapon; remove the known perpetrator from the scene of the crime and begin to debrief him; summon the SWAT team and get them searching for other possible accomplices and weapons; document as much as possible, even before the evidence technicians arrive to collect evidence; set up a command post and activate an incident command system (which includes tactics that are used to organize law enforcement resources into productive teams that can accomplish large blocks of work); take witness statements from students and teachers and administrators; call the bus drivers back; evacuate the school as quickly and as safely as possible; and, finally, search every nook, cranny, locker, office, closet, coat, and backpack left in the school, no matter how long that takes. In actuality, from 10:40 a.m. on, all the police tasks were designed and orchestrated to facilitate the safe evacuation of Columbia High School.

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Mike Bennett didn't really feel any pain. He was lying half in and half out of Sue Owens' classroom, and it was so quiet he could hear how fast he was breathing. Sue's students were all hiding behind the desks and file cabinets in the front of the room, and Sue was halfway between the students and Mike, and starting toward him. "No, I'm okay," he told her. "You stay back there with the kids."

His adrenaline was pumping, he knew that, because all of his senses were heightened, and his mind was racing. The kid with the gun, his eyes had met Mike's eyes just before he pulled the trigger. Did he mean to look at Mike, or was he turning to look at John Sawchuk, or was he just lifting his head at some sound? So why did he fire? Mike couldn't understand that. He didn't even know the kid. It happened so fast he couldn't remember - did the shot happen first or did he dive first? What if the kid actually missed him from that close? There still wasn't any pain. He hauled himself up on his elbows and tried to shift his legs further into the room, more out of the hallway, but his legs didn't want to listen to the instructions his mind was sending, so he used his elbows to propel his body a few feet into the room. *I gotta at least take a look*, he thought.

Mike twisted his torso up a little more and peered down. "Sure enough, my leg, the pants had been shredded, and there was blood all over," he recalled. "But still I thought I was going to be okay, the pain wasn't even in my mind at that point. I'm no scientist, but I know there was a lot of brain stuff going on that masked what I was feeling. I could see my leg. Blood-covered. I could see where the wounds were, because there was really thick, red, almost maroon-type blood, and at that point I had enough leak out where it was kind of a brighter red down around my socks and onto my shoes. But I knew obviously then that I had been hit."

Mike was mostly concerned that Sue and her students remain where they were, and stay safe, and he was fighting to keep his thoughts clear. He

assumed that John Sawchuk was still struggling with Romano in the hallway, but then, all of a sudden, John poked his head into the doorway to check and see whether Mike had been hit or if he was okay. John balanced the gun in one hand and was holding Romano down with the other.

“John, look, there’s a class in here. You can’t bring him in here,” Mike blurted out, and John dragged Romano over to the Social Studies Office.

As Mike began to haul himself to his feet and tried to balance in the doorway, Ernie Tubbs, an East Greenbush police officer, ran up the stairs and flew into the hallway past Mike. “Where is he?” Ernie barked, and Mike said, “John’s got him in the Social Studies Office.”

Then the hallway started to fill up with people, running, shouting, screaming that Mike needed help, yelling into Linda Way’s room to get a chair ready, lifting him, holding his arms, telling him, “You’ve got to sit down,” and Mike answering, “No, I think I’m all right,” when really he was beginning to get a little woozy, when he could feel the blood seeping into his shoe and making his sock heavy, forcing that coppery taste into his mouth, and all the police radios crackling loud behind him about another shooter, the building not secure, and then he saw Mary Gause and Sheila Reilly, the school nurses, walking toward him and saying, “How do you feel?”, so calm and easygoing, like one of the girls he coached in basketball had sprained her ankle and they were just showing up with an Ace bandage to wrap it for her, and then some EMTs with orange bags circling his chair and a paramedic poking him with an IV and that certainly hurt, why does that hurt so much? Mike wanted to know,

when he couldn't feel his leg?, and there were suits all over, with guns, way too dressed up to be carrying guns, and Sheila said, "Mike, can I give Noreen a call?" and Mike thought that was a good idea, Noreen worked at Carroll Hill Elementary in Troy, yeah, give Noreen a call, and Sue Owens kept rubbing his back, "Is this making you uncomfortable?" Sue wanted to know, "Is this bothering you, because I need to do it to get the energy out? Are you okay?"

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East Greenbush Central School District Superintendent Terry Brewer said he had never even heard Jon Romano's name before Monday, February 9, 2004. "Prior to that," Mr. Brewer explained, "any situation the school may have had with Jon would have been through Child Study teams or appropriate placements, through Special Education Services and things of this nature. Unless there's been a request for a Superintendent's Hearing or a request for some specific intervention from my office that would exceed the authority given to a building principal or to our Director of Special Education Services, I generally won't see those kids."

On that Monday, Terry Brewer was too busy to be worrying prematurely about disciplinary problems or Superintendent Hearings: He was preparing for budget meetings with several department heads, and he had a meeting with the Athletic Director, who wanted to come in and review his budget proposals for the year. And he wouldn't have been personally aware of

any crisis, because Terry's office wasn't anywhere near the high school. The School District's Administrative Offices shared a building with Genet Elementary School on Rt. 4, right before it runs into Rtes. 9 & 20, several miles east of Columbia High School.

At about 10:35, Terry had called down to the high school, looking for the principal, Mike Kzuzdal, because he was one of the department heads who was scheduled to show up, and Mike hadn't arrived yet. But as soon as Terry hung up the phone, it rang right back, and Assistant Principal Tim Crannell delivered every superintendent's nightmare message – he informed Terry that shots had been fired at the high school and they had gone into lockdown. And at that point, Tim couldn't even tell Terry the situation was under control. He didn't yet know who the shooter was; he didn't know if there were any other shooters still roaming around the building; and, by the way, Mike Kzuzdal wasn't there.

“First of all, when you hear that news, it's kind of a shock,” Terry remembered, “and then you've got to kick into a response. The primary concern going through my mind was the safety of our faculty and our students in the building, and trying to get as much information as possible about the status of where we were with safety. You know, were people safe? Give me an assessment of that. What are you doing? Okay, let's get our plan in place. Make sure our people are safe. Do a full assessment of what's going on in the building and make sure we're getting the appropriate agencies involved with us immediately.

“There’s a whole list of things that you start to kick into, and you try to put personal thoughts away. Because at the same time that this was going on, my son was at the high school, and I know that he was in the area that they were describing. My son was in 10<sup>th</sup> Grade when this happened, and he was in that wing. Actually, he gets support from Mike Bennett, and he gets support from John Sawchuk as a first daily routine. He’s a special education student. So I knew that he was in that vicinity, and just like any other parent in the district, I was wondering, *‘Okay, what’s happening?’*”

“The first thing I did was to ask Tim Crannell, who was calling it in, to ask him where he was in our plan and what they had done. He responded that they had gone into lockdown, and they were currently evaluating various aspects of the building and ascertaining the injuries. At that point in time, I was told that preliminary indications indicated that one person, a teacher, Mike Bennett, had been wounded in the response to this.”

So Superintendent Brewer created an open line between his office and the high school, and staff at both locations went into their protocol to notify various agencies and people that there had been a major incident, and to start putting their plan into place.

East Greenbush Central School District has a safety plan that not only helped to form but is also appropriately aligned with New York State SAVE legislation, and the different schools in the district routinely have practices regarding different types of drills -- whether it’s an intruder, or a weapons situation, or even a severe, weather-related situation.



In addition to the mandated drills, each of their buildings has a safety team and various protocols that they have to employ. They've established a common code throughout the district for any incident – could be a white code or a blue code or whatever -- so when the drill goes into place, there's an announcement made. The teachers are trained to go through the various processes, and they know when they hear a particular code that they have specific responsibilities and actions to follow.

Terry Brewer wasn't surprised to learn that Tim Crannell and Hank Kolakoski had begun to handle the crisis efficiently. It was clearly his job to ask what they had done, but he knew those guys and he was sure that as soon as the shooting had been reported, the code for it had gone into effect at the high school. That meant the immediate and complete lockdown of the building, of course: all rooms were locked; no one was to be in the hallways; and teachers were to secure and monitor their classrooms. Moreover, he was confident that the protocols the teachers and aides have to follow within that process to check their classrooms, like moving students from windows and light areas, had also already been implemented.

The District's safety plan also specifies that administrators in charge at the various schools don't necessarily have to contact the superintendent's office before they make critical calls to the police department. That's exactly what had happened that morning, and Terry was grateful he had administrators who didn't rely on him in every crisis.

“Then we talked about securing the perimeter of the building, which was part of the plan,” Terry remembered, “and I asked questions about, ‘Okay, have you blocked off the perimeter?’ And they had. ‘Have you determined that all doors and areas are locked down, so no one can come in and out?’ And they had handled that, too. We talked about the need to set up a large enough perimeter to just allow police and response teams in. They were directed to block off the road with our school vehicles, and to only allow authorized personnel in.”

But all the time he was on the phone with Tim, Terry Brewer was thinking about his son, and wondering if he was safe. By his own admission, the anxiety he felt was putting a lot of things into perspective. Though to function as a responsible administrator he occasionally had to distance himself emotionally and remain professional when parents complained to him, now that he was worried his child might have been in the line of fire, he was reminded once again of how isolated they could feel. “So I had my secretary call John Sawchuk’s office, because I knew that’s where they would have taken my son. When I found out that he was all right, that relieved a lot of anxiety, and I could move forward from there.”

The next important concern? Controlling the flow of information. Tim Crannell had told him that a reporter from Channel 9 was in the building, doing a story in the metal workshop, when the shooting occurred, and that she was still there. Even if she hadn’t been there, Terry knew the media monitored 911 calls and the police and fire radio frequencies, and he also figured the

firestorm was only minutes away from him, so he decided to set up the public relations area in the Genet Auditorium. They could use Goff Middle School as the receiving site for all the students, faculty and staff who would be evacuated from the high school later in the day, and herding the media to Genet all at once might keep them from his students and faculty a little longer. Plus, he wouldn't have to answer one frantic call after another for hours – he could issue a vague, preliminary report to all of them at the same time, and buy some time to find out what was going on down there.

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Mike Kzuzdal, the Principal of Columbia High School, attended the regular monthly meeting of the Suburban Council High School Principals in North Colonie from 9:00 a.m. until past 10:30 on the morning of February 9, 2004. After the meeting, he felt a nasty migraine headache coming on, so he drove home to get some medicine.

When Mike unlocked his door and went in, the message light on his phone machine was blinking. He poured a glass of water, took his medicine, and pressed the PLAY button on the machine: One message, from Kathy, his secretary at Columbia, her anxious voice saying, "Mike, we have a shooter in the building."

Mike and Kathy enjoyed a great working relationship, and there was usually a lot of humor mixed into their communications throughout the school

day, but he knew she wouldn't joke that way. That just wasn't their kind of funny, and it didn't do much to help his migraine, either. And on top of that, Kathy's voice kept going: "Mike Bennett's been shot. We think someone else has been shot, too, and there may be another shooter in the building."

Mike hurried back out to his car and took off for Columbia High School, which was usually a fifteen-minute drive away from his house. As he sped toward school, he tried to call Terry Brewer's office, but the lines to the administrative offices were all tied up. He did reach Kathy in his own office, but she didn't really have any new information, and the people he could hear frantically talking and scurrying every which way in the background simply added to his anxiety.

When Mike reached Luther Road, at the end of the long driveway that led up to the high school, he was stopped at a State Police roadblock, questioned and searched. A Columbia teacher was stationed there to help identify employees, though, and he told them, "Yeah, this is the building principal. He is who he says he is."

So they let Mike drive up, but as he approached the main entrance, he was shocked to see that "the front of the building, which is usually extremely busy -- nobody's there. I mean, it looks like a Sunday at 5 o'clock in the morning, just empty, except for probably half a dozen big guys in riot gear -- you know, the black outfits, the helmets, full face shields.

"That image will stick with me forever, pulling up to that school -- because I'd been working there, at that point, over a decade -- and I had been

standing in front of those school buildings for sports events, for the regular school day, at open houses for parents, you know, everything, and it's normally such a vibrant, alive kind of place. And just to be completely, in the middle of a school day, so totally empty, or what looked like empty, except for the armed men, was terrible."

Two burly guys with what seemed like automatic weapons escorted Mike into his own building, and he didn't remember his feet hitting the ground a whole lot. He asked them what was happening, but they weren't going to give him any information, even if they had been told he was the building principal. "We'll get you to the commander here in a second," was all they would say.

And Mike wasn't 50 feet into the main hallway before representatives from all kinds of police agencies – New York State Troopers, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bureau of Criminal Investigation – all of them at once telling him what it is they wanted him to do. Some of them wanted to get all the kids out; others needed to make sure all the students and employees stayed inside until the building was thoroughly searched. Most of their statements seemed at that particular moment either aggressive or contradictory to Mike.

He was looking for Chief Lavin. He had worked with Chris for years, and he felt comfortable with him. Better than that, he trusted his judgment. As far as Mike was concerned, only one police officer was going to be in charge, regardless of how many others were on the scene or what agencies were

jockeying for command position, and that officer would be Chris Lavin. Mike mentioned that fact to a couple of the uniforms that were haranguing him, and they didn't accept his message too well.

As Mike struggled to reach his office, he could feel his migraine growing exponentially worse. His head was just screaming, and he still hadn't learned enough details about the crisis. Mike Bennett was his close friend – had he been killed, or was he only wounded, and how badly? What about the students? How many of them had been shot? And where were the shooters now? He needed hard, clear information, and a bunch of guys with big egos and their own agendas were keeping him from getting it.

“One particular gentleman from State Police – and I remember his name, but it's not important – was downright obnoxious, and he was the kind of fellow who would stand real close to you. ‘I need you to do this,’ he'd say, and it really wasn't a request. Now I'm sure that works in a lot of situations, but that doesn't work very well with me. I remember stepping back from the man and saying, ‘Look, I don't know what's going on here, but I'm not doing anything until I talk with Chris Lavin. Chief Lavin, he's in charge here, is he not?’ And I walked away from the guy.

“One of the biggest things in the first two hours was trying to deal with the inconsistency and the disorganization and the egos of all these police agencies. I felt much better once I got into my office and got attached to Chris. Now God forbid we or anybody else is ever in a situation like this again, but my advice to other school districts is, when you know who's in charge –

whether it's somebody from your local police agency or whoever it is – you become tied at the hip to that person, and that's part of incident command training. That's something very important that we learned.”

\* \* \*

When Hank Kolakoski reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Jon Romano was lying on his stomach in the Social Studies Office with John Sawchuk sitting on his back. A couple of teachers ran over and told Hank there was a second shooter – a white male, in a red, hooded sweatshirt – so Hank started going room to room, not only to see if anyone else was injured but also to look for a white kid in a red hoodie. Hank wasn't exactly sure what he would do if he found a kid in a red sweatshirt in one of the classrooms – maybe just assume he was the second shooter who was holding the class hostage and go to find some police officers. But then Hank learned the suspect he was searching for was just a student who had panicked and run away, so he went back to simply checking for injured students or teachers.

At one point, a teacher handed Hank a cell phone from one of the students who had received a text message from Jon Romano, and he read, I'M IN SCHOOL WITH SHOTGUN. GET OUT on the phone's small screen. It didn't read, WE'RE IN SCHOOL. It said, I'M, and he realized the pronoun was an important clue, and that calmed him right down. On top of that, the police from East Greenbush had questioned Jon Romano really fast, before he could

gain his wits back, and asked him if he was alone, and he told them he was, so everyone was pretty sure there was only the one shooter.

However, Hank and Chief Lavin weren't going to take any chances. One of the hard lessons from the Jonesboro, Arkansas shootings, as well as the bombings at the Olympics in Atlanta, is that you search the interior before you evacuate your people, because the shooting or the bombs often happen on the outside after the primary stimuli have scared people into running out of the building.

The City of Troy had sent 14 officers that morning, all SWAT-trained, and they arrived within twenty minutes of being called. Hank organized them for the search: He gave them maps, and master keys, and sent staff members with any of them who became confused by the school's layout, and they spent a couple of hours conducting a thorough search for the possible second gunman. The SWAT teams searched every room, looked at every bookbag, and opened every locker. They went through the basement, the crawl spaces, the maintenance closets, the bathrooms, offices, athletic storage compartments, the band rooms, backstage in the auditorium, everywhere. And they didn't find anything that pointed to another perpetrator.

"At one point," Hank recalled, "there was a comical but almost bad incident that happened. We had broken the SWAT guys up into different-sized groups, and there was a 4-man SWAT team going through, and they could hear talking, and we were in lockdown, so there wasn't supposed to be any talking. Now, we were under construction, and they went into one of the construction



areas, which were tied into the building. They jumped around the corner, and yelled, 'Police! Freeze!' with their guns leveled. And I guess it was a couple of painters who didn't speak English, and they didn't know what was going on, all right, when these four guys in these ninja suits with their weapons drawn pop out, but they got that straightened out, so at least nobody was shot or anything like that."

\* \* \*

The ambulance crew brought Mike Bennett out the back entrance of the high school to avoid the guy with the video camera and all the other commotion up the hill near the main entrance. A helicopter was circling overhead. The intravenous line they hooked up must have had something pretty strong in it, because Mike already felt more alert. As they lifted his stretcher into the ambulance, he looked around and said, "Wow, this is kind of a big deal, isn't it?" and all of them started laughing.

The EMT who rode in back was a woman, and she was giving Mike a play-by-play as they headed down Luther Road. "You know, it's going to take us a while to get out of here," she told him, and Mike asked, "Why, is there an accident down there?"

"No, the State Troopers and the media have it all blocked up."

"Holy shit, the media knows about this?"

"Oh, wait until you see," she answered.

But the ambulance sides were solid, of course, so Mike had to lift his head a little and look past his feet that were invisible at that moment, just two rounded bumps sticking up now under the strapped-down blankets, and try to stare out the small back windows at where they had just been – at his school, with all the students and friends and colleagues he was leaving – to make sense of what the EMT was describing for him.

At first, he couldn't see much, because it took a few minutes for the police to clear a path, but then they were moving and they made the turn and sped up a little, out and under the bridge, and Mike could see all the satellite connections up and all the line of news trucks there and all the State Troopers and the fire trucks and all the school buses along the road waiting to pick the kids up.

Mike looked at his watch. It was 11:20. All of what had happened had happened in only about 40 minutes, and he couldn't believe there was a line of school buses there so fast, waiting to take the kids home, or probably to another school, he guessed, as soon as the lockdown was over. And then he heard the EMTs talking about how scary it was to hear the school shooting call come over the scanner, and for them to get that call.

"Jesus," Mike said, "I can't believe the media is all over this already," and the woman EMT said, "Man, I wish I had my cell phone so I could call your wife." But then Mike remembered – he had his cell phone.

"So I dialed up my wife and I said, 'Reen?' She said, 'Mike?' I said, 'Yeah!' And she goes, 'Oh, thank God. What are you doing?' And I said, 'Well,

they're taking me over to Albany Med and the EMT made the suggestion of having a cell phone,' and she said, 'Oh, my God,' and she got a little emotional. 'I'm so glad you called, how are you?' And I said, 'I think I'm going to be all right. Everything looks to be okay.'"

Noreen had heard about it fifteen minutes before. Her building principal had pulled her out of class and told her, and she was on her way down to Albany Medical Center herself.

As soon as Mike and Noreen hung up, Mike's cell phone began to vibrate. Surprised, he pulled it out and said, "Yeah?" A voice said, "Oh, thank God, it's not you." It was his sister-in-law, Meg, whose husband was an East Greenbush police officer. "It wasn't you."

And Mike said, "No, it was."

"No, no, no, I mean, the one who got shot."

"No, really, it was me. I'm in the back of the ambulance right now, going up Madison Avenue," he told her, and he could hear her begin to freak out at the other end of the line.

\* \* \*

In 2004, the District Attorney in Rensselaer County was Patricia DeAngelis. Slender and attractive, with an easy smile, Trish DeAngelis could make most anyone feel welcome in a heartbeat, if she felt like it. However, she

also had a well-deserved reputation as a relentless prosecutor, and even some local attorneys thought of her as a legal pit bull.

She was in a meeting with a couple of people from the county's Budget Department on the morning of February 9, discussing the exorbitant cost of expert witness fees in cases that involved mental illness defenses. She had just spent more than \$25,000 for an expert witness on the Wilhelm case, where a woman from Hoosick Falls had been on trial for murdering her baby in a bathtub. The budget people were comparing it to other homicide cases where prosecutors had spent amounts ranging from 40 to 100 thousand dollars for certain psychiatrists to testify, and Trish was telling them, "The good thing is, right now, I don't have any cases where there are any mental illness defenses," when her Deputy District Attorney, Joel Abelow, came running into the room and interrupted them. "Trish, we need you right now." She could tell from his face that something serious had happened.

Trish got up immediately and walked out of her office with Joel, down the hallway and out of earshot, and he told her there had been a shooting at Columbia High School. Someone had been shot, they knew that, but they didn't know if he was going to make it. They didn't know how many others had been hit. The information was sketchy, but the situation sounded bad. Trish ran back in her office and said, "The meeting's over."

Trish and Joel and one of her investigators raced over to Columbia, and gathered whatever information they could as they drove - name, age, arrest record, facts like that. Most importantly, they learned the shooter's name and

age – Jon William Romano, 16 on his last birthday, October 30, 2003, and that they didn't have anything on him in the criminal database at her office.

“If he had not been 16, it would not have been my case, because he would have been a minor,” Trish explained. “If he's 15, it's a B felony, we can prosecute him for the B, but it's depending upon his age. If he had been a freshman in high school, we probably wouldn't have been prosecuting the case, and it would have gone to Family Court, and that would have been a huge difference in terms of time. So it's maybe 50 years he's facing versus -- well, I'm not sure what that would be, but it's a pretty big difference.”

When they arrived at the high school, Trish wasn't surprised to see two things: that there were police everywhere, and that the media had beaten her to the scene of a crime, again. She didn't know exactly how they could do that so often, but they did it all the time.

One of the State Police officers walked the District Attorney's team up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor where the shooting had taken place, and Trish could feel her heart racing. As she walked down the hall, the doors to the classrooms were all closed but the doors had windows in them, so it was simple to look inside and see who was in there and what was going on. She didn't know the whole story by any means, but she quickly observed the layout, and she understood that someone had carried a loaded shotgun down this hall and that someone had been shot right where she was walking, and not very long ago. *All these children in these classrooms, was her first thought. What they just went through.*

Someone came up and told Trish that only one teacher had been shot, but nobody had his name yet, and he was only wounded in the leg. The wounded guy's wife was a teacher at another school, and somebody had already called to let her know what happened, and Trish thought, *Oh, my God, what a horrible thing for this woman, to get a phone call like that.*

The police were taping the hallway off, marking the location of the spent shotgun casings, and putting evidence markers out, so Trish and her team had to be careful as they stepped around everything. She went into the bathroom where Jon had confronted Eric Farrell, and then was led along the path the police assumed that Jon had followed, from what they had learned so far in the interviews with eyewitnesses they had conducted and from the witness statements that were still being taken at the school.

Trish didn't spend too long in the hallway, but she wanted to make sure that someone took a video of it, and the State Police brought a camera up and shot everything, so they would have a record of where all the evidence was before they picked it up. She was thinking of the prospective jurors for the trial, if it came to that. She had learned a lot from the Christine Wilhelm case, where the State Police had taken a video of the entire house, and when she showed that video to the jury, it put them right there at the crime scene, and right there in the same room where the child had been murdered. That had a big emotional impact on them, and she wanted to have similar options in this case.

"It was eerie, though, because when you went into this room, I mean, it was just that everything was still there," Trish remembered. "They had taken

this kid away, and they had brought him to the police department, but all the evidence was still there. The teacher who had been shot was gone. I didn't meet him for a while. But all the teachers were there, in their respective classrooms, with the students, and I remember peeking my head in to one of the teachers and asking her if everybody was okay, and she said, 'We're okay.' And I just remember thinking, *These children are never going to forget this. What a horrible thing. Just horrible.*

"It was very weird, very strange. I've been to a lot of crime scenes, but that was just horrible, because the whole time, I was thinking, *I'm standing here with these children, and I know they're safe, but their parents don't. What must their parents be thinking?* It was eerie -- because it was a school, and a school isn't supposed to be a crime scene."

\* \* \*

Around noontime, Lorraine Barde was waiting to take a lunchtime walk, to get some fresh air and wake up a little, when her phone rang. It was an educational testing company, asking her about Jon taking the SATs. She thought that was weird, because her son wasn't even attending Columbia High School anymore. Why hadn't they called the school and learned that Jon Romano was at Hudson Valley Community College, doing their 24-credit hour high school equivalency program?

Then, right after that, the woman she was supposed to walk with rushed over to her and said, "There was a shooting at the school where your son used to go." Lorraine was stunned, and thought she was kidding. "No, I'm not," she responded, "There was a shooting. But no one was killed. One teacher was hurt."

So Lorraine immediately tried to call Jonny on his cell phone, but then she realized he would still be in class, and called her sister instead, just to make sure that Jon was safe, and her sister gave her the bad news -- Jon was the shooter. Their sister-in-law had seen it on the news and called her. "Stay there," her sister told her. "Scott's on his way. Just stay there."

Scott was her brother. He would know what to do. A hundred things were spinning around in her head. Why hadn't someone from the school called her? They all had her number where she worked. Jon wouldn't want to kill anybody. How could they believe he would do that? Jon cared about people. She knew he loved her. And what about his brother, Matt, in Iraq, and Rachel, his sister? He certainly loved them, too. What about at Christmas? Lorraine had four brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews and they usually pulled names in her family, you know, and Jonny had asked her, "Do you think it would be okay if I bought extra presents this year for those who have been extra special nice, because I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings if I don't get them for everybody?" And she had said of course that was okay, that everyone would understand, and he did buy extra presents: He bought one for Lorraine's sister because she had done a lot for him, and one for her brother



who had brought Jonny down to a Giants game with his son and Lorraine's nephew. School shooters didn't do things like that.

And what about Chris Bascomb, Jon's friend who was riding his bike on Brookview Road, less than a tenth of a mile from home, Chris who was hit by that drunk guy in the pickup truck who took off so nobody found him until a half hour later? Jon cared about Chris. Jon and another friend had gone all the way over to Colonie to watch Chris play in a volleyball game there. They had been close friends, and Jon had cried so much about Chris dying. It hit him really hard, and it was the first time Jonny had to deal with death, and that was somebody his own age.

Why hadn't the school called her? Maybe the TV news people had it wrong. They could be wrong. It could have been somebody else. And the high school, God, they could be wrong, too. They were wrong all those other times about what to do, how Jon should learn and what courses he could take and what was best for him and home tutoring and all that stuff. They could be wrong about the shooting. She wasn't going to panic. She'd wait, that was what she would do. Scott would be there soon, and he'd know what to do.

\* \* \*

East Greenbush Police Officer Ernest Tubbs transported Jon Romano to the police station that was next to the old East Greenbush Public Library on Rtes. 9 & 20. Ernest Tubbs was a likeable guy, who was good at his job. He was

especially good at getting suspects to talk to him. He had been the first officer to reach Jon Romano that morning, and he was the one who handcuffed him, so it was a perfect fit for him to stay with Jon and ride with him over to the station and then to take a statement from him. Jon seemed pretty willing to talk in the police cruiser, but Ernest Tubbs just wanted to calm him down a little, and make him feel comfortable about telling his story to him. Let him get the gist of it out – what he was trying to do, why he did it, that kind of thing. Keep it short, to the point, without taking notes. He didn't want him to say too much before he could write it all down and get it right.

In a separate cruiser, Officer Ray Diaz took a couple of other Columbia students to the station as well. They were two of the students who had received text messages from Jon, and Chief Lavin knew they were key witnesses and wanted them debriefed as soon as possible.

It was 12:04 p.m. when Ernest Tubbs got Jon in and settled and the preliminaries out of the way and was finally ready to start writing. He and Jon were sitting alone in the police department booking room, and Jon started to talk. He told Ernest about getting up and writing a long note where he told people he was sorry. It was four pages long and he left it on his bed. Then he admitted loading the shotgun, and driving to school with the intention of going inside with it.

Ernest wasn't that surprised that Jon was admitting so much. Some perps, especially kids, needed to get stuff off their chests when they were finally in custody and the adrenaline had stopped pumping and they were

starting to realize where they were and what could happen next for them. But Jon Romano was getting pretty specific, that was for sure.

He told Ernest about his fantasy of going into Columbia and shooting up the place, and he named names that Ernest didn't know how to spell – Crenel and Koosdale. Jon said specifically he hated those two principals. They lied to him, didn't respect him, etc., and said he definitely would have shot those two if he had seen them.

Then Jon talked about where he parked his mom's truck and how he got in the school without anybody stopping him or talking to him. He described what he was carrying – the loaded shotgun, the black case, the backpack so he'd blend in with the other students walking around – and how he made his way up to the second floor.

Ernest heard the phone ring in the other room and wondered who it was. The kid's mother must have heard by now he was in custody, and somebody would have recommended a lawyer. The first thing that lawyer would do was make a call to the police station, probably even before he or she would jump in a car and head over there to interview the kid for themselves.

Now Jon was saying how he spotted a teacher – some Talowsky guy he liked okay – and decided he wouldn't kill him. He went into a bathroom instead to think about what he was going to do. That was probably something he should have done a couple of hours before, when he was still home, loading the damned shotgun in the first place, but it wasn't Ernest's place to mention

that. It was his job to listen, just to be a good listener, and write everything down. Hurry up, kid, your lawyer's going to call any minute now.

So he was in the bathroom a while, kids came in and went out, Jon sent a text message to some pals to warn them, he was nervous and he washed his hands, a white kid came in, Jon let him go out without plugging him, but then he followed him out and freaked when he saw two other kids and blasted away and . . .

The phone in the booking room rang. Ernest Tubbs answered the phone, listened to the caller, and then dutifully marked the time -- 12:47 p.m. -- before he wrote the following at the bottom of Jon's statement:

*(Received phone call from George Lamarsh who Ided himself as a lawyer who is now representing Jon Romano. The above written by E.A. Tubbs as told by Jon Romano, and George Lamarsh stated that the questioning must stop until he arrives. He is from E. Stewart Jones.)*

\* \* \*

East Greenbush Police Chief Chris Lavin was still at Columbia High School at noontime, coordinating the search and evacuation efforts, so he didn't know specifically what method of interrogation Ernest Tubbs was using with Jon Romano. But he trusted Officer Tubbs. He could almost duplicate Ernie's

banter as he uncuffed Romano, not only to make the kid feel less anxious and more disposed to blab a lot, but also because he was in a secure room in a guarded facility. He knew that most scared 16-year old kids would feel like confessing to Ernie by the time they were in lock-up, and he knew that Officer Ernest Tubbs, using a combination of paraphrasing, exact quotations, and shrewd listening skills, would capture on a voluntary statement form a lot more than just the essence of Jon Romano's story that day.

Chief Lavin didn't have to be at the station to know what was going on there. He'd been a police officer for a long time; most of the typical police work he could perform in his sleep. He knew, for instance, the obvious: somebody would see the breaking news and get in touch with one of Jon's parents, and Jon's mom or dad would call a lawyer almost immediately, and then that lawyer would be on the horn to the station in a New York minute, and pretty quickly, wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am, the talking would be over. And he knew Ernie Tubbs was just as aware of that typical progression as he was, and that he'd get as much useful information as he could in whatever time he had available to him.

And after whatever drama might attend the interrogation had come to a boil and then simmered down, the usual routine could begin. They'd have to ink the kid's fingers and get a complete set of prints; have him face front in the first photo, and turn to get his profile for the second; facilitate the arrest-process with him. In other words, ask the numbered questions and record all his answers to fill up the pertinent personal information on the arrest form --

place of birth, date of birth, address, phone number, height, weight, race, sex, mother's name, father's name, social security number, employer – all the pedigree information called for by the standard New York State arrest report. It was 130 questions long. An officer had to record all that information digitally, keyboarding the answers into the system, so that usually took 30 to 45 minutes.

Finally, in the following period of waiting for a magistrate to be available, an officer had to prepare an accusatory instrument, which is a court document that sets out specifically the penal law article that's allegedly violated, that's apparently violated, and that the officer has probable cause to believe was violated, based on information and belief -- the source of the information and belief being the officer's personal knowledge, and supporting depositions. Michael Bennett, in his trauma room hospital bed at Albany Medical Center's Emergency Room, would be deposed by another East Greenbush police officer, and that would supply the supporting deposition they would need.

So when the magistrate was there, and ready, the accusatory instrument and the supporting deposition and Jon Romano would all be marched out of the police station, up the staircase into the East Greenbush Town Hall, and into the Town Courtroom on the main floor of the Town Hall, where a judge would most likely remand him to the Rensselaer County Jail without bail, until such time as a preliminary hearing could be scheduled, which is a right of the defendant. Jon would have the right to have his preliminary hearing within 72 hours. And, except for housing Jon Romano until a transfer officer showed up

later in the evening, (when Jon would be subjected to a strip search and would have to change into jail clothing and head off to the county lock-up and stay incarcerated there until a week after his sentencing), that series of events comprised all the prisoner tasks Chief Lavin and his department could be held accountable for today. And that was enough.

Chris Lavin certainly had his hands full at the high school, but he was a thorough guy, and he couldn't just forget about all the other parts of the process that he knew were occurring or would be coming up. All the details, on-site and off, kept whirring around in his head, and sometimes he thought he was too attentive for his own mental health.

He knew, for example, that there was only one perpetrator at the high school. All the evidence that had surfaced, from the moment he ran up the steps with the other officers to the present moment, close to two hours later, pointed to one shooter. There was virtually no intelligence that there was more than one, but Chief Lavin had to assume everyone was a suspect, like it or not. Everyone had to be moved from the classrooms to the auditorium, and then to the waiting school buses, under SWAT-team escort.

"The students were not allowed to go to their lockers," Chris Lavin remembered. "They were not allowed to carry anything, so all their book bags, their coats, their personal belongings, were all left behind. A typical February 9 in Rensselaer County, NY, is a winter day, and these kids didn't have much to keep them warm. Plus, at first we made them come out with their hands up, but we discontinued that requirement after a while.

“The entire high school was evacuated under very close police scrutiny. Everybody leaving the school got looked at, even though we allowed them to swing their arms at their sides. No book bags came out. No personal property came out. No visits to their lockers. No chances to dump evidence, if they had any. We did not pat down everybody. We brought them all out, loaded them on buses, and brought them to Goff School. And when the kids were finally all out of the building, we did the same thing with the staff.

“As a matter of fact, faculty and staff that came out with the students got on the buses with the students, leaving their own personal items. Their own automobiles that were parked in the lots -- they couldn't go to them. We wouldn't let them. Nobody could go out to their cars and get this, that, or the other thing, and there were many, many requests for that.

“I have to -- my meds are in there!”

“No, you're not going to your car.”

“As soon as the school was empty, the SWAT team, and it took them hours -- the SWAT team then proceeded, following their own techniques, to search every room, look at every book bag, open every locker. They searched the attic, the basement, the crawl spaces, everywhere. It took them hours, but they did it. And they determined that there was no other perpetrator. So from both an evidence standpoint and from a physical search standpoint, there was no second perpetrator. There was no mystery there. Jon Romano acted alone.”

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Principal Mike Kzuzdal had arrived at the school probably half an hour after the shootings ended, so that was around 11:10 a.m., and more than an hour later, at 12:15 p.m., there was still a little too much uncertainty to suit him. In his mind, it was just a lack of clarity on what was going to happen. Not that it was really chaotic. It wasn't. And it wasn't that he needed every specific thing to run perfectly in the middle of a major crisis – jeez louise, they had 1400 kids and 150 employees all locked down, and officers from four or five law enforcement and government agencies wandering around trying to take charge and do it their own particular ways – so he could hardly expect total perfection.

Besides that, they were extremely fortunate, and Mike was profoundly grateful for that. There was only the one injury to Mike Bennett, and that didn't seem to be a life-threatening one, even though the shooter had discharged his weapon three times. That was about as lucky as Mike had expected to be in his life. What were the odds on John Sawchuk being on that floor observing a teacher when the kid started firing, or on the kid missing the two boys at close range in the hallway, and then on that one shot only striking Mike in the leg? A million to one, probably.

In one sense, given one or two miniscule changes in fortune, it could have been another Columbine. East Greenbush certainly had a confused, angry student with a shotgun wandering around with 80 or 90 unprotected people in that one section of the school. If Romano had started firing in those classrooms, it could have been a disaster -- they could have lost 10 or 15 kids in a matter of two minutes. Thank God he missed, and then that he didn't go after any other

students, and thank God John Sawchuk wrestled his gun away from him before anybody got killed.

In another sense, though, Columbia High School was prepared for a crisis like this because of what happened at Columbine. It was probably sad to say, but it was true. The East Greenbush safety plan had worked pretty darn well, except for the command wrinkles with the other agencies, and Chris Lavin had ironed most of those out quickly. The SWAT teams had canvassed the building for other shooters, and then had escorted the students and faculty first to the auditorium and from there onto the buses. Now that all those folks were off to Goff Middle School, the SWAT teams were doing the painstaking job of checking all the bags and lockers and personal items. That would go for a few more hours, but at least all Mike's people were safe. That's what he cared most about.

And Mike hadn't even minded Terry Brewer's constant calls in the midst of it: "Now the whole time, and I don't blame him at all," Mike remembered, "Terry Brewer is on the phone. He's been through enough of this that he knows that he's not supposed to come to the high school. He's the guy in charge of the district, and the worst thing for him to do would be to hop in his car and come down to the high school. He needs to be someplace else. But he also wants to know exactly what's going on every single minute. So he's on the phone, wanting to know what's going on, and we were in constant communication."

What was arguably toughest for Mike was dealing with the Columbia High School staff members, a number of whom had been terrified and then searched and who finally found themselves bused down to Goff School in the middle of a school day. Mike had to talk to the assorted and disgruntled group - all 150 of them -- in the gym at Goff.

“Luckily I didn’t have much of a role with kids meeting their parents at the middle school. The other administrators in the district took care of that, which was a godsend. That allowed me to deal with loose ends at the school, interviewing staff that were close by, that kind of thing. Then I was able to follow the staff and the kids to the middle school. The other administrators took care of the kid-parent interface, and the press, and I talked to the staff. And, of course, some staff were right there and they knew - ‘God, he shot a gun outside my room’ - and others didn’t know a damn thing about what had happened.

“So I did the best I could, sitting with these adults in the gymnasium at Goff Middle School, with a lot of emotional stuff going on outside - not chaos, but ‘Thank God my son’s all right’ kind of stuff - and I was filling them in as best I could. That was a real tense meeting, because I was trying to give information, not misinformation. But I did see a lot of misplaced anger and frustration and nervousness - ‘How could this happen? I’ve been in this building for 30 years. It’s a great place, and then somebody comes in here with a gun. How did that happen?’

“The anger manifested itself by a couple of people who I knew well – veteran staff – who stood up and said, ‘I can’t believe this; I’m going to go and get my car.’ And I just very matter-of-factly said, ‘No, you can’t do this, because the police, da-da-da-da-da . . .’ And before I left, I said to this one teacher here who I’ve known forever and who’s a good friend and we’ve worked on a lot of things together, ‘Look, I’m sorry,’ and he said, ‘I know. It’s been a challenging day.’ So there wasn’t any lasting enmity, but it was just that frustration. People were taken out of their routine, and given, in most cases, no knowledge whatsoever. Some of those folks had been sitting, thinking the worst, with kids, for several hours.

“That was the hardest part of the day for me, because people were demanding a lot of information that we just didn’t have. The teachers and the staff were actually very reasonable. I don’t want to say that people were unreasonable, because it’s very hard, and because I was feeling that my role was to take care of them. I’m responsible for them as much as for the kids, and a lot of them are good friends of mine. But not being able to give all the answers was really hard. They understood that, but I think it was more me internalizing that desire to be able to do all that for them and not being able to.”

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The police gave John Sawchuk too much time to think. He had to wait first with Jon Romano and a bunch of teachers in the Social Studies office for more than an hour, until the SWAT teams finished the initial search of the buildings. At the beginning, he had been kneeling on Jon's back for probably 10 minutes or so, and Jon was cooperating with everything – he held his hands behind his head and kept his legs crossed over – and then the East Greenbush cops had cuffed him and let John Sawchuk get up and relax a little. But they wanted John to stay in there because they said he was close to what had happened, and they wanted his witness statement before he forgot anything.

The only place they let him go was back to Nancy Van Ort's room, where he had been observing her class, because he left his cell phone there. And they were reluctant to open the door for him when he got to that room, too. "Who is it?" they wanted to know.

John shouted back, "It's Mr. Sawchuk. Open the door."

And they yelled, "Okay, hold on, we've got to move the bookcases."

"I just need my cell phone," he told them, and they handed his phone out to him. John was anxious to call his wife. The story was breaking news on all the radio and TV stations, and one of them was reporting that a principal had been shot, and he didn't want her to hear that and worry that it was him.

Then some other plain-clothes agents – ATF, FBI, who knows – wanted to bring him down and talk to him in the nurse's office where they had set up a makeshift headquarters, but John convinced them to do the interview in his office, so they went down there instead. And all of that probably ate up another

hour, so John couldn't help in coordinating the search or the evacuation of the school. They kept him pretty much isolated through the whole thing, and mostly he sat and brooded about what had happened, and why.

He felt guilty about Mike Bennett, and felt like if he had handled it differently, Mike might not have been shot. Apart from that, he was completely in the dark about why Jon Romano had stopped struggling, and then John remembered something he had established the year before: "I had initiated a mentoring program here for at-risk students, where our faculty members were paired with kids who had issues of various kinds, at-risk kids. We would meet with them periodically through the week, and we would do things together. I took them to Union College; I took them to various community events, and things like that, as a group.

"And the student that I personally mentored was Jon's best friend, Brad Whisher, so I kept thinking back to, *Why did Jon stop? Did he stop because he knew Brad liked me? That me and Brad got along really well? Why did the kid stop, when you would think that he would go just in the other direction? You know, you shot somebody, you had nothing to lose, why would you just automatically stop? I mean, he just shut down. He didn't struggle. He did everything I told him to do. It was just kind of strange.*"

There wasn't anything John could do about any of it now, he knew that, but he couldn't stop thinking about all of it.

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Going into the emergency room at Albany Medical Center, Mike Bennett felt like he was on *ER*. Any other day, he would have had to wait an hour or two to be seen, but early that Monday afternoon, there was a line of curious people two deep watching him get wheeled down the hallway.

Mike's old pal, Jim Omar, showed up to help him get through it, and Mike joked to him that every nurse, doctor, intern, and specialist in the joint wanted to take a look at his wound and poke him and take pictures, all because of the news coverage.

"They were taking x-rays," Mike recalled, "and they had cleaned up my calf. There were obvious puncture wounds and they wanted to see if there was still shrapnel in the leg, that kind of thing. An East Greenbush police officer came in, and he was taking my statement. There was a lot going on."

Mike didn't get too upset until his family started to trickle in. They had been hearing the news reports, and most of the first reports built up the drama and got the story wrong. They said the teacher had been hit three times, and Mike's family had some pretty anxious moments until they got to the hospital and saw for themselves that Mike was okay. "I don't think they think about the victims' families," he observed. "There's absolutely no question about that. Seeing my family come in, not knowing what they were going to walk in on, no matter whatever people said about me being okay, they still needed to come in and see that I was okay. It was hard for them, and it was hard for me once I saw them. That was probably the first time that day I got really emotional, watching my father and my sister come in. I had more a sense of relief when

Noreen, my wife, came in. There wasn't so much emotion. But when my dad and my sister came in – seeing my dad, and seeing how emotional he was -- they hadn't known I was okay, and that was hard. That was a tough few minutes.”

After the doctors read the X-rays, Mike and Noreen had to make a decision. There was a piece of shrapnel that was embedded in Mike's calf, and the doctor presented them with a paradoxical dilemma: He told them, “It's not deep enough where it's going to cause a problem, but it's too deep to leave in. We'd have to go in and cut it out, remove it that way, and it's up to you what you want to do.”

It had already been a long enough day for Mike, and he didn't feel like adding surgery to it. “Leave it in there, tape it up, and I can get out of here,” he told the doctor, and he thanked his lucky stars that Jon Romano had used birdshot and not buckshot in his shotgun. Birdshot is much less destructive than buckshot – the pellets were smaller and sort of powdery. Mike figured it was going to scar up either way, with or without the surgery, so he figured he'd take his chances and leave it in there.

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After the school was completely evacuated, between 1:30 and 2 p.m., Hank Kolakoski sat in his office and tried to reconstruct the events of the day. He and Mike Kzuzdal and Chris Lavin got separated a few times -- he was



sorry about that. But Hank was a volunteer fire chief, and if there was an emergency, he wanted to be in the thick of it. Cops, it's blood and bullets; firefighters, they've got to get in there and see that flame -- what are you gonna do? Next big crisis, he'll rope the three of them together and tie them to desks in the Main Office, and then they won't get separated. If they did anything wrong today, it was that, and that turned out to be pretty minor.

But Hank was especially proud of his people, and of the school's safety plan. All of it had worked. There were a few glitches, here and there. Some staff members bugged him about some kids who bailed out of windows and ran down the hill to the Building & Grounds area, even though that's what they were supposed to do. Hank had told staff and students, time and again, if they had to leave the building, go down and assemble in that area. The second-guessers wanted everybody to lock themselves in their rooms and not leave the building at all, but nobody got hurt, so what's the big deal? They made a decision in the moment, they followed through, and it worked out okay. That's good, right?

And how about those kids and teachers up on the 3rd floor? Hank couldn't say enough about what they had done. Linda Way had her kids out of the way. Sue Owens had her kids down. They had tipped over tables. They were on the floor. Everybody in that wing knew what was going on. Everybody was cool. There was no panic.

You could see fear. Sue was definitely petrified, but she had her kids under control. She was standing there, just staring, but she wasn't panicked.

She was scared to death, but everything was cool. Linda Way, same thing. These were petite women who weren't going to go out and duke it out with anybody, but they took charge, as far as Hank could tell, of what had to be done. That was pretty damned impressive.

As far as he was concerned, the kids were absolutely amazing. "We have an emergency squad of students at the high school," Hank explained, "who are members of volunteer fire departments and ambulances throughout the area, and they help us with emergencies at the high school. Some of them had sent word down through their teachers - 'If you need us,' like that - so kids were rising to the occasion. There were a couple of staff members, and I don't want to give any names, but they had panicked. We've told the kids, 'You might be alone at some point during an emergency or a lockdown, and some of you are going to have to be leaders. You might have a teacher who goes down, right? -- heart attack, somebody could get shot, some folks might panic.' Well, we did have a couple in this instance, and there were some students who stepped up and calmed down staff members and helped them out. I can't be more proud of those kids."

Hank was in many ways a typical teacher, and he was a stickler about planning. He wanted the best plan they could get, and he wanted it followed to the letter - boom, boom, boom -- but during an emergency, you can't always do that. There's no plan that's going to work 100 percent every time the way you think it's going to work in your head. You've got to make adjustments as things change. You have to make changes yourself. It's a dynamic process.

What you think is true now may not be true 30 seconds later, and the next day you may find out that none of it was true. But at the time, you take the information you've got and you do the best you can. You make changes, you adapt, and Hank felt like they all did that pretty well today.

The major problems for Hank, after the shooter was disarmed and Mike was transported off the scene, came from outside law enforcement – mostly the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms guys, who all thought they were in charge, because a gun had been discharged. There must have been 12 ATF agents there, and Hank didn't think there were 12 ATF guys in the whole Albany area. At one point, he was leading some staff members up the stairs to help move some kids, and this one local ATF guy, who Hank knew for God's sake, said to him, "Who are you, and what are you doing?"

So Hank told him who he was and what he was doing, and the creep put his hand on his gun and said, "You aren't going anyplace." Hank was flabbergasted. Luckily, Mike Kzuzdal saw what happened and came up fast and read him the riot act: "Look, we're going to do whatever the police want us to do. You guys are not playing on the same page. Everyone comes to my office now and we're going to have this out." When they got there, Chris Lavin said, "My incident, my people, my operation. I need you, I've got to have you, but one person's got to call the shots, and that's going to be me." And the ATF guys begrudgingly agreed.

But they didn't give up. A little later on, a couple of them went down to the East Greenbush station, where they were holding Jon Romano, and told the

desk sergeant they wanted the prisoner. Now there's a big metal grate that hangs above the protective glass, and if anybody shows up and makes the cops inside the glass feel threatened, they push a button and drop the metal grate. So the sergeant told him to forget it -- that he didn't have any authorization to pick up the prisoner -- and the ATF guy slammed his badge against the glass and began yelling at him. WHAM! Down came the grate and almost took the guy's hand off. Those clowns just didn't know when to back off.

Suddenly, Hank was startled out of his thoughts. His secretary yelled in and asked him to take a phone call from an irate mother. Hank had been waiting for one of these. This was the other minor glitch: they had moved all the students down to Goff, and kept a list so they could check them off as they left with their parents. But some of the kids who were witnesses had stayed at Columbia to be interviewed, and somebody had forgotten to send the list of those kids over with the others. And somebody else neglected to call the parents of those witnesses, and when the parents showed up at Goff and couldn't find their sons and daughters, the shit had hit the proverbial fan.

After Hank let her rant for a minute, he stopped her. "Listen," he told her, "don't yell at me. You know, we've never done this before. We're as confused and scared as you are, and we're doing everything we can. Teachers have risked their lives today to make sure that your kid is okay, and that every other kid is, too. If we made a mistake, tell me, talk to me, so that we don't make this mistake again, because you as a mother don't ever want something like this to happen."

The mother calmed right down and said, "Yeah, you're right. Thank you," and Hank apologized. "You're absolutely right. I have your son's name on a list here. He's being questioned by the police, because he knew what was going on. And I apologize. We never sent that to Goff. You're absolutely right. We won't make this mistake again. But your son is safe. There's not a scratch on him or anything. He's just being questioned by the police. You're free to come over here and be with him as that's going on."

And that was that. Hank hung up the phone, and went back to his reassessment. So, okay, maybe there were a couple of other minor glitches. No problem. He'd just have to tweak the plan a little.

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It had been a hectic, disconcerting afternoon for Lorraine Barde. Scott, her brother, had picked her up at work and they went straight over to the police station in East Greenbush to see Jon. When they got there, George Lemarche, the attorney from the E. Stewart Jones law office who had called Officer Ernest Tubbs and asked him to halt his questioning of his client, was already in with Jon, getting his side of the story. "Can't see him now," the desk sergeant told Lorraine. So Lorraine and Scott waited.

George came out and told Lorraine that Jon had asked to see her. "Can't see him now." Scott and Lorraine waited some more.

Lorraine's sister had checked with a paralegal she knew, and called Lorraine at the station to tell her that if Jon was being charged as an adult, the police might not have to let her see him. It was up to them, their choice. So Lorraine asked about that, didn't get a definitive answer other than the repeated non-answer, "Can't see him now", and they waited some more.

Finally, after more than two hours and several more stock denials, Lorraine and Scott gave up. They drove to 2<sup>nd</sup> Street in Troy and met with E. Stewart Jones himself, at his offices, answered about a hundred questions, and watched him take page after page of notes.

On the way home, Lorraine got a call on her cell from Jonny – she figured it was his one phone call – and he told her, "I don't know. I don't know what I was thinking, Mom. I don't know why I did it." He also said she would be able to visit him the next morning at the Rensselaer County Jail, at 10:15, and then he had to go. Within a few minutes, Lorraine got another call on her cell, from an attorney she had never called. He wanted to represent Jon, and Lorraine said, "Thank you. We already have an attorney," but she was shocked he had her cell number. Who gave him that? And when they pulled up at Lorraine's house on Petalas Drive, the press and police were there waiting for them.

The police had a search warrant. Were there any areas that were just Jon's? Which room was his? What computers did he work on? Where was that? What about a digital camera? We're going to need to take a few things we need for evidence. You can pick them up after the trial. Do you have the receipt for

the shotgun? When they asked that, Lorraine asked Scott to call Stew Jones, who said yeah, that was okay, she could give that to them, and so she dug it out and handed it over.

Then they spent a long time up in Jon's bedroom, moving things around and making noise, collecting what they were confiscating and looking for other weapons or stuff to make bombs or whatever, and Lorraine was feeling angry and desperate and she didn't know what, trapped between the cops inside and the press outside, waiting or circling like human sharks. She felt like the goalie in hockey – she had let the important one slip by, the game-winner. There might have been other players on the ice with her, but she was the goalie, the last line of defense, and it was ultimately her fault. When Scott suggested they get the hell out of there, she jumped at the chance.

“Okay, but we need to get a signed list or something that shows what they take,” Lorraine said to him, and the cops agreed. Then she told them, “You can leave it on the table.” But they said, “Well, we can't do that because we have to get it signed, and then we wouldn't be able to come back in, because we would have locked the door.” They promised they would mail it to Lorraine, and as she was going out, Lorraine thought, *Fat chance – I bet I never see it.*

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Before Trish DeAngelis and her investigators left Columbia High School, she helped to draft the search warrants that the East Greenbush police used to gain access to Lorraine Barde's house and property and to execute the search of Jon Romano's room and possessions. And when she went down to the East Greenbush Town Court for Jon Romano's arraignment about 5:30, she asked Judge Diane Schilling to sign the warrants so the officers could go and conduct their search. Trish wanted to be as thorough as possible, because you never knew what was going to occur during the search itself.

Often, police officers would call her office from a search site and ask, "Hey, we see something that wasn't in the search warrant. What should we do?" Then Trish or one of her assistants would tell them, "You've got to stop," or, "you've got to call the judge" or, "you've got to do an amendment," or whatever they thought was legally appropriate. So Trish tried to be as careful and thorough as possible when she drafted a warrant or offered legal advice before an actual search, because she knew how those precautions could avoid a hassle later on.

When they finally brought Jon Romano up from the jail, which was on the first floor of the building that housed the Town Court, Trish was shocked by how he looked. "That was the first time I saw him," she explained, "and I remember thinking how young he looked. He's got a really young looking face - much younger than 16. He has a baby face."

An arraignment is the first stage in the criminal justice process, and at the arraignment a judge informs the defendant of the criminal charges that are



being brought against him. Judge Schilling didn't need to charge Jon with the 86 counts that Trish DeAngelis planned to bring against him in Rensselaer County Court (one for every person Jon could have shot on the 3rd floor at Columbia High School), so she only charged him with a couple of counts of attempted murder. And the judge didn't want to get involved with bail either, so she just said, "I'm not going to set bail right now. You can apply to county court for bail."

And that was that. No fuss, no muss, and nothing odd about the arraignment, as far as the District Attorney was concerned. The escorting officers took Jon back to his cell downstairs to await transport to the Rensselaer County Jail, and the justice clock started to tick for Trish DeAngelis. She had 144 hours after the arraignment to do a preliminary hearing, but she certainly wasn't headed in that direction, because she didn't want to tip her hand to the defense attorney at a preliminary hearing and give Stew Jones a chance to cross-examine her witnesses. Nope, wrong direction. Trish had the same 144 hours to go before a Grand Jury and get them to indict the case, and that's what she planned to do.

But that was tomorrow's work, and today wasn't over yet. Terry Brewer was holding a press conference and panel for the media and the community at 7:30 p.m., and Trish had to get there early to discuss what people on the panel could and couldn't say. It was going to be a trying evening, she was sure about that. She could hear the parents demanding an explanation already, to say nothing of the reporters and cameras that would be capturing every

sensational, exasperating moment. Trish usually recommended to everyone who would listen that they never talk to the media. They'd be sorry in the end. Nothing good ever came from talking to the media.

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**Mike Kzuzdal:**

“Then that evening, rightfully so, the planning group – Terry and I and a few other people from Capital BOCES and State Ed. and everything – we said, ‘We need to get a community forum.’ We anticipated that, and the news helped to publicize that, and so we went to Genet Middle School, to the auditorium. I don’t remember the exact number, but our auditorium probably seats five or six hundred people on the floor, and that place was just packed. And we decided right up front, ‘Look, we’re going to be completely honest. We’re going to be straightforward with people. If we don’t know, we don’t know.’

“But that forum, as I remember, went probably three hours or more, and I praise Terry and the Board of Education, who could have sat in the back or not come at all. Every one of them sat in the front of that auditorium with Terry Brewer and myself and Chris Lavin, and they didn’t know anything more than anybody else in the audience. But their solidarity and their being there made a tremendous difference. It really set a tone. If we hadn’t held that evening session, then a whole bunch of other things would have started spinning out of

control. It was a lot of venting. And by the time I got home, it must have been midnight.”

**Terry Brewer:**

“Well, it certainly is probably the worst incident that I’ve ever dealt with. You’ve got to understand – we’re not trained in this. We’re educators. Primarily, superintendents are educators. So we go to different trainings and different workshops regarding school violence and this and that. But going through a practice drill and going through the actual response are two different things.

“My goal throughout this was to have as much clear information as I could, as much as possible, so that I could meet with the press and meet with the public with clear and concise information. I didn’t want any speculation. I didn’t want any information that was not clearly defined. Just the facts. I just wanted facts. I didn’t want any information that would jump to conclusions or this or that. I wanted to try to give assurance to people that we were managing this, and that we were doing the best we could, and the first thing we needed to get out there was that people were safe – other than the one employee, Mike Bennett, who was wounded.

“I took on the position as the leader of the district, and therefore I was responsible to represent this district in as positive a vein as I could in a crisis situation. I was in constant communication with my Board of Education throughout this. They were called early on. Our policy and procedure is that

there will only be one spokesperson for the district, and I'm designated as that spokesperson, unless I give it to someone else. So now it becomes my responsibility to present this incident in a very factual, informative, positive, and supportive manner – the best we can do it – to provide comfort to our staff and our community.

“Again, throughout this process, we continually talked to various agencies and the State Education Department, the Senator's office . . . I don't know, just a lot of different groups. I constantly kept our Board of Education informed, and indicated that we were going to have a special meeting where all the Board was there and the District Attorney was there and the Police Chief was there. And we responded, from 7:30 to after 10:30 that night, to any question that was raised – you know, a lot of anger and frustration from parents like, 'You could stop this. How could you not know?'

The bottom line, I said to them, 'Look, we're in this together. This is a community response. No one's to blame here.' As far as the response, it went very well. Quite frankly, we came out of this situation pretty well because of planning and knowing how to respond. If it weren't for John Sawchuk and Mike Bennett intervening, it could have been much, much worse, because this young man was out there to do harm to people, and his intent truly was to harm individuals. He was looking for some individuals specifically.”

**Chief Chris Lavin:**

“Every decision that the school district made was run by me first. Even Brewer, when he made press releases, although I think he scheduled the first press release without talking to me personally, but then I did talk to him after he had announced when the press release was going to be. He was going to have a press conference at 2:00, and I said, ‘Terry, this isn’t going to happen. We’re not going to be done here by 2:00.’ As it was, I think . . . the school was evacuated by 2:00, but I was too busy. I couldn’t join in. And I don’t know if he ever did it. I really don’t remember. I think he postponed the press conference until 4 or 5. He may have issued a couple of statements, but the actual press conference was put off until 5, I think, and then put off again until after 7. And by 7:30, I was able to meet with him. I attended the press conference with him.

“He announced the press conference, and he invited anyone in the school community – parents, students, anyone who wanted information – to show up. And they did. They packed the seats in that auditorium at Genet School. It was interesting. He ran the press conference a lot like he runs school board meetings, where he has an agenda. Every meeting has an agenda. He welcomed everybody for coming. He ran it just like a school board meeting; they did everything except pledge the flag. He said, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do. We have several speakers here this evening who have information to give,’ and he listed who was on the dais, including myself. ‘We’re going to hear from these speakers, and then there will be an open question and answer. If

you have a question for the panel, we want you to stand in line. Form a line on each aisle, and we'll take turns fielding questions.'

"And they did. The people filled the aisles, all standing in line. There were probably a hundred people who stood in the aisle and took their turn to talk to the panel. The panel was Brewer and me, principal, vice principal, Ron Tritto was there, a couple of school board members were on the panel. It was hours. It was hours. And then we did just what Terry said. The superintendent gave an overview. Then I think I was the second speaker, and I gave a summary of what the police did, what happened as far as the police were concerned. Then Mike Kzuzdal explained what happened as far as he was concerned, and what he did, and how the building responded, and how faculty and staff responded, blah blah blah -- steps taken, exact route, and so forth. Not everybody had something to say.

"Well, then the press asked questions, and when the press was done asking questions, then the people could ask questions. So it was after 11:00 before I got home. There were these long lines of people: Question #1: 'Well, how did he get the gun into school?' The press had already asked that question, but the parents wanted to know. And after we were done talking about that, I'll bet half the people who were standing in line, left the line. That was probably the single question that everybody wanted to know: 'How did he carry the gun into the school?' In a case like a gym bag. In a bag that looks like what every other kid carries into school. As far as anyone could see, he wasn't carrying a gun into school. He was carrying a bag into school. Now you sit in your car

and you watch kids get off the buses and walk into the high school any day of the week, and find one that isn't carrying something. And a lot of them are carrying gym bags, and they're carrying skis, and this was in February. Snowboards. You don't carry a snowboard into school - you carry a case. These are precious, very expensive objects, and they have bags. They're carrying a large bag that holds a bulky object. We have the bag from the bathroom. He carried it in a bag."

*(East Greenbush Central School District Public Information Session Minutes from the 7:30 p.m. panel discussion in Genet School Auditorium on February 9, 2004 appear in Appendix G.)*

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Someone at Albany Medical Center mentioned to Mike Bennett that he might not want to go home. His house would be swarming with reporters. With so much else to think about, Mike hadn't considered that, but of course it made all kinds of sense. Why wouldn't they be there waiting for him? So he and his wife, Noreen, decided they'd go over to her mother's house in Loudonville. The media probably wouldn't figure out how to find them there.

Mike has a big, extended family, and a lot of them showed up at his mother-in-law's house that night. "I've got a sister who teaches in Fonda, and she came over," Mike recalled, "and my sister Maureen and her husband came over. I had a sister come in from New Hampshire, a brother come in from

Connecticut, a brother who happened to be on the road in a doctor's office up in Canton, NY, and he heard there had been a school shooting at Columbia High School and at that point they had gotten my name, so he heard it on the news at almost the exact time my sister had been able to get through to him on his cell phone. It was just bizarre. He lives outside of Syracuse, so he went down there and picked up his wife and they came into town.

"But it was just amazing to think that we couldn't go back to our house. So we went to my in-laws and cracked open a Guinness and sat and had a drink to just settle in a little bit and we popped on the news coverage and everything. Even CNN at one point was running it. It was an out-of-body experience."

On one level, it was amazing to Mike that everybody was making such a big deal out of it. Maybe what was so strange was that all these people were talking about him. He was the center of all this attention, and that felt funny. Funny peculiar, not funny ha-ha. And he couldn't keep from thinking how weird it was that he and Noreen and the kids couldn't go home. What was up with that? Land of the free, home of the brave - how can the news media make it almost impossible for a family to get back in their own house? But at least all the activity helped keep Mike's mind off the shooting, even if the television didn't.

Later on, Mike Leonard, the East Greenbush Athletic Director, brought John Sawchuk over to the house to see him. "I'm sorry," was the first thing John said to him. "What are you saying you're sorry for? You saved my life,"



Mike answered. "I just feel responsible is all," John went on. "I keep thinking there was something else I could have done."

Mike tried to reassure him, but John was in a funk, so they sat and watched some of the news coverage of the shooting. The reporters kept saying the same inaccurate stuff on every channel, over and over, but it was still like a magnet that just kept pulling them back to it. "That's not what happened," John corrected the TV.

And the East Greenbush press conference was televised, too, so they watched some of that and responded the same way: "None of that is right; none of that is true." The folks talking hadn't had the chance to interview Mike or John, and they just didn't have enough of the right information. They described people in the wrong places, and they had John tackling Romano and making the gun go off. Where'd they get that version? It was too early in the process. There were a lot of people involved, and they just had the wrong information, that was all. They were trying, though. They were doing the best they could, trying to answer everybody's questions and needs, and provide information for the community. Their hearts were certainly in the right place.

After John left, Mike had a few minutes alone, and he tried to puzzle out what had happened, but he couldn't. It wasn't really registering with him. He felt like not just his body was still in shock, but it was his mind, too, and his memory and perception of the whole event. He had what he thought was his memory of putting the kids in the classroom and then running down the hall to catch up with John Sawchuk. He had that part pretty clear. But the next part,

where he heard the gunshot and jumped into the nearest doorway, or was hit and maybe propelled in there by the blast, and the blood oozing out and the other teachers talking and the cops asking him questions and the school nurses and EMTs and paramedics and doctors and nurses and family and the TV reporters who kept telling the story a different way – yikes, it was all sloshing around in his head, muddying up what he thought he knew. He was tired, that’s what he really knew, and he missed being home. And it suddenly occurred to him that he missed his old life, and that he might not be getting that old life back for a long time.

\* \* \*

Mike Leonard drove John Sawchuk back to Columbia High School so he could get his truck and drive home. It was after dinnertime, it was dark, and it had turned pretty cold, but the police were still keeping people away from the high school, because it was considered a crime scene. They recognized John, though, and they let him come in and pick up his truck. Then Mike followed him all the way to Clifton Park, just to make sure he made it home safely.

John had spoken to his wife on the phone several times during the course of the day to let her know what was going on, but she was at work for those calls. Their daughter was home sick, and even though John’s wife had called her and explained what had happened, reassured her that her dad was okay, and instructed her not to answer the phone, none of that had made much

difference. She was just a kid, and she was worried about her dad. Reporters had been calling the house all day and barraging her with questions, because she was the only one there, and finally she had answered the door and let a bunch of reporters into the house, including one particularly persistent guy from *The New York Times*. She was pretty freaked out by the time John walked in. "What are you doing?" he asked her when he saw the *Times* reporter still there, and she said, "I thought he was one of your friends."

John understood persistence. He even admired it. And this guy, pushy as he was, had a better picture of what happened than all the reporters on the local news stations that John and Mike were watching over at Mike's house earlier. So John answered a few of his questions, but then he asked him to leave.

It had been a really long day, a long 16 or 17 hours. 16 or 17 hours, holy cow, it felt like a week, or a month, or a lifetime. John didn't even know how to think about it. He was exhausted and sorry and grateful and more upset than he could ever remember being, all at once, and an abstract concept like time, like the 16 or 17 specific hours that had just occurred in his life, wasn't computing very well for him. He felt unmoored, like he was drifting in a small boat out onto some unfamiliar lake in dense fog.

He had told Mike how sorry he was, that he couldn't keep the kid from pulling the trigger, but what else could he have done? It went too damned fast is what happened. He kept going over it in his mind, replaying the event, again and again – what the hell else could he have done differently? He didn't know

anything about guns. He could tell Romano wasn't finished -- John could sense that in the tension of the struggle, and the damned kid certainly wasn't giving up before he tried to shoot Mike -- he knew that much, at least.

Romano's eyes, they were something John couldn't forget. The eyes were just dead, that's all, but they also looked right through you, and he had looked through John with those dead eyes and then he had tried to kill Mike. John was sure of that. There was no doubt in his mind about that. He could have compassion for Jon Romano, but he also had to think about Mike Bennett with a wife and two young kids at home.

If - always that conditional word - if he hadn't been there, how many would have died? Wasn't that part of it, too? He had to try and remember something good right now. He felt responsible for Mike, but Mike was alive, and nobody else had been hit. He had done that, for sure. And he had held onto the gun, the best he knew how. He had held on, and Mike was alive. That was something, wasn't it?

John wanted to go back and start the day over, drive to work with a coffee from Dunkin Donuts, write down the daily tasks on his easel, meet with students, eat lunch and maybe share a joke with a couple of friends, help close up the school, then drive back home, hug his daughter, kiss his wife, eat dinner, watch a show on TV, and go to sleep. He just wanted a normal day, and a chance to not remember those dead eyes ever again, and to not hear that damned gun go off.

## Characters

*(Occupations are for Spring, 2004)*

*Lorraine Barde* – Jon Romano’s mother

*Michael Bennett* – Special Education teacher at Columbia High School

*Terrance L. Brewer* – Superintendent of East Greenbush Central School District

*Patricia DeAngelis* – District Attorney for Rensselaer County

*Travis Ellis* -- Student at Columbia High School

*Eric Farrell* -- Student at Columbia High School

*E. Stewart Jones* – Jon Romano’s Defense Attorney

*Jeffrey Kinary* -- Student at Columbia High School

*Henry “Hank” Kolakoski* – Psychology and Social Studies teacher and District Safety

Coordinator for the East Greenbush Central School District

*Michael Kzuzdzal* – Principal of Columbia High School

*Chris Lavin* – Chief of Police for the East Greenbush Police Department

*Sue Owens* – Dept. Chair and Social Studies teacher at Columbia High School

*Jon Romano* – Student accused of the shooting at Columbia High School

*John Sawchuk* – Assistant Principal at Columbia High School

*Liz Shanley* – English teacher at Columbia High School

*Kristopher “Casey” Steponik* -- Student at Columbia High School

*William Telasky* – Substitute teacher at Columbia High School

*Linda Way* – English teacher at Columbia High School

*Peter Zilgme* – Social Studies teacher at Columbia High School

**What People in the East Greenbush  
Central School District Learned  
and What They Changed  
in the Days and Months  
after the Incident**

About four months after the shooting in Columbia High School, on June 3, 2004, at a school safety conference held in the Albany Marriott and titled, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Lessons Learned from the East Greenbush CSD*, Terry Brewer revealed the following to an audience of high-ranking New York State Education Department employees, police officers from a number of Capital Region law enforcement agencies, and local school administrators and teachers: “In ten minutes, our crisis occurred, and then we started into a recovery phase. Ten minutes of crisis results in ten months to a year of recovery. The crisis management piece is, quite frankly, probably the easier piece. The recovery piece takes much longer and is more essential.”

The ten-minute crisis he referred to is, of course, the time when the threat of violence at his school was realized and not contained -- between the point when Jon Romano looked up from the sink and saw Eric Farrell standing in the bathroom with him to the point at which John Sawchuk handed the shotgun to Bill Telasky and knelt on Jon Romano’s back. Those are the ten increasingly terrifying minutes in which a disturbed boy maintained the visible

and considerable power to destroy 25 or more people in the South Tower at Columbia High School.

Ten minutes? That doesn't seem like such a long time. Compared to the immense stress of, say, fighting in an all-day battle between government troops and guerilla forces in Iraq, or the mental strain involved in living for weeks as a hostage of kidnappers, ten minutes of knowing someone had fired a gun somewhere nearby and was roaming around with the intention of shooting people may not seem like such a terribly long time, but it was certainly more than enough time to create an unforgettable trauma for many of the people involved in that crisis in East Greenbush on February 9, 2004.

And what should time, or comparably scary predicaments, have to do with the situation anyway? A terrifying incident might spark a heart attack or an aneurysm in less than a second, so by that standard, ten minutes would be long enough to provide more than 600 chances to scare you to death. And that's assuming the effects of the shock stop at the end of what we are calling the crisis period, that ten-minute span of uncertainty, when we probably know that in many cases the effects could intensify after the crisis, not during it, because our bodies naturally release adrenaline and endorphins and other stimulating or protective substances to help us survive or shield us during a severe crisis. For many people, the effects of trauma continue to worsen as time passes.

Comparing or trying to somehow quantify life-threatening crises, so that we can better understand what people who live through them might be

experiencing, may be impossible task, but there are important lessons to be learned from considering the different circumstances. In extreme situations, like wars, combatants and even most civilians understand they are in harm's way and, while they may be hoping for the best, they can't help but face the fact that they could die at any time as the war rages around them. That usually is not the case in a school setting, although since the tragic shootings at so many schools, like in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Littleton, Colorado or Red Lake, Minnesota, from the mid-1990s until the present (see Appendix A: A Brief History of School Violence in America), most of us in America have had to accept the incontrovertible fact that more children have been endangered and murdered by other children in our schools during the last ten years than at any other time in our country's history. It has gotten much harder to think of our schools as safe havens for our children.

In his remarks on June 3, Terry Brewer went on to say, "The process of stopping violence in schools is really going to take a considerable amount of time, and it's going to take training and understanding. It's going to take human resources. We practiced our plan, and the plan worked, but you can never understand how different a school safety plan and the reality of an incident really are. You have to wonder as you look at the information that comes out, daily, regarding what's happening in schools. I get an e-mail called *The District Daily* and I just picked a couple of other incidents. Shortly after our incident, on March 19, it indicates:



**“AUTHORITIES FOIL NEBRASKA TEEN’S BOMB PLOT  
Could have been as serious as Columbine.**

A teenager was charged with attempted murder after the police found him outside the school with twenty homemade bombs, a rifle, and a note saying he wanted to injure everyone at his high school.’

“And just a few days ago, again in *The District Daily*, in Georgia:

**“STUDENT ACCUSED OF PLOTTING TO GO ON A  
KILLING SPREE AT SCHOOL**

Two 14-year old students accused of conspiring in a killing spree at their middle school were ordered held without bail Tuesday, after a judge ruled there was enough evidence to support the charges.’

“The key is that an incident can happen anytime or anywhere, and as good as your plans are and as much as we planned, there is a lot more to incident response and planning and recovery than we often think. Our schools are pressure cookers for children, and we have to pay due diligence to what is going on in our schools on a daily basis.”

Although the incidents that Terry cites were more like the shooting in East Greenbush, where no one died, than they were like the instances explored in Appendix A, where there were significant losses, the effects are still immense and personally devastating for those involved in the incidents. School shootings have become disturbing and dreaded scenarios for all of us and, with the most recent killings at a high school in Colorado and in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, it seems that they are no longer simply familiar places where violent and/or mentally disturbed

children wreak havoc or seek revenge on teachers, administrators, or fellow students: Lately, damaged adults and unbalanced ex-convicts have chosen schools at random as sites for heartbreaking acts of abuse and executions of children.

One would think, given the unrelenting continuation of violent school incidents during the last decade, that we would all have come to expect the worst by now but, on the contrary, it's still hard for many of us to believe that the worst will happen in our particular schools, in our specific communities, unless we have the misfortune to have children who attend dangerous schools where violent occurrences are an everyday phenomenon. Then, I guess, we're thankful when they get home safely every day. But no matter what kind of contentious school atmosphere we have grown used to, none of us as parents would knowingly send our children off to a school if we assumed that someone with a shotgun was going to sneak in around 10:15 in the morning and start shooting at kids and teachers.

So we exist in a strange kind of mental limbo, with no choice but to accept the inevitability of violence in general but truly amazed when it actually happens where we live. Moreover, the priceless element that gets shattered, over and over again, is the sense of innocence that many people, against all odds, are able to maintain in regard to their own schools. The weight of continuing tragedies in so many spheres of our lives can easily push us toward feelings of resignation or denial or the hopeless feeling that we may never be able to regain that lost innocence. However, at this point in our history and in

our culture, a renewed sense of innocence would be a welcome addition, if we worked hard enough to actually establish it and safeguard it. Why should it be unreasonable to hope we might have one place outside our homes where we feel our children will be safe?

Well, no, it may not be unreasonable, but we may never achieve that sense of security in our schools unless we enter into a different kind of relationship with them – a relationship where we as community members get involved integrally in a process of honest communication and intervention that produces a new brand of collaborative security. That’s what Terry Brewer and the other administrators in East Greenbush decided to propose after the incident on February 9, 2004. After their 10-minute crisis, a lot had to be done quickly, not only to help many people recover mentally and emotionally, but also to re-install even a rudimentary sense of well-being and security for everyone in the school district. Terry Brewer involved his entire community – administrators, faculty, staff, students, parents, BOCES employees, police officers, representatives of the New York State Education Department, you name it – he worked hard to involve all of them in that process of recovery.

### **The Start of the Recovery Phase**

What Terry Brewer refers to as the Recovery Phase began even before the incident day was done. In the few hours between the press conference he held at 3:00 p.m. on February 9, 2004 and the community meeting that ate up

the entire evening, from 7:30 until almost 11:00 p.m., Terry gathered all of his administrators together for a discussion on how to proceed.

“The Recovery Phase started actually before that evening in trying to make sure everybody was okay,” Terry explained. “It started with gathering everybody at Goff and having a meeting about what we were going to do. Then we had to talk about how we were going to get the kids in and whether we should be out another day, and we had a lot of discussion about that. The thing we got from people who had been involved in the response was, ‘Get reengaged as soon as possible. Don’t close the building down. Don’t make this a situation that takes on another life,’ so to say. We immediately said, ‘Okay, we’re going to bring back kids in the next day, but before we do that, we’re going to prep the staff. We’re going to meet with staff. We’re going to talk about counseling support.’”

Terry and his staff also decided that afternoon that they were going to pull a committee together from the community to help them assess the situation, and about 35 community members volunteered to join that very evening. And within 48 hours, NYSED had put them in touch with specialists from think-tanks in New York City and Washington, who also agreed to help out. Kay Bradley, from SED’s Student Support Services joined the team, along with others from the State Education Department.

In the end, close to 80 individuals agreed to work together as a re-assessment committee. “We formulated a straightforward process,” Terry recalled: “I said to everyone, ‘Okay, we’re going to look at our plans, and we’re

going to again address our issues, and we're going to prioritize what we want.' Basically, we agreed that within three weeks we would have responses to this incident. And in each one of the steps in our process, again, we decided to manage it to make sure that there were really clear communications, and to try to restore confidence in our schools - confidence, trust, and understanding - and to come out with an action plan that people were part of."

### **A Day after the Incident**

John Sawchuk had always liked to think of himself as a strong person, but he had a real hard time back at school on Tuesday, February 10. He had been there at the Superintendent's meeting the afternoon before; he had helped to decide they should open again right away; and he felt that if they were asking the kids to go back, they should all go back themselves. But he wasn't sure he was ready for it. He stopped, right in the middle of getting dressed that morning, and couldn't figure out what he should wear. He didn't know what it was. He wasn't about to stay home, but he didn't know what to wear, and it took him quite a while, standing there, confused, before he could figure it out.

And when he walked into his office, it felt scarier than the day before. His secretary was there, and she was crying. A bunch of teachers were standing around, and they were crying, too. John asked them what was going on, and they told him to look at the Times Union headline:

## A gun and dreams of dying

it read. The reporters had done their research, John figured, had gained access to the suicide note that Jon had left in his room, and were divulging the more lurid parts of it.

*“Well, this thing happened, but Jon Romano didn’t really want to hurt anybody -- that’s what I had been thinking,”* John remembered. *“That this was something that just happened. 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. And all this was thrown at us that morning.*

*“Again, we didn’t know any of it. We didn’t know he had planned this. We thought it was all a spur of the moment thing. We were all separated. We didn’t talk about it. All the people that were involved, we were all separated and we didn’t get a chance to talk to each other and then everybody split. Everybody went home. Then, when we came back to school for the next day, our focus was, *We’re going to take care of kids.* We didn’t talk to each other again. And so reading all that hit us hard. It hit us real hard personally, and it hit us hard as a staff. We hadn’t been told any of it. His confession, his partial confession, was in there, and we just read all that stuff.”*

So that’s how the day started. Terry Brewer had set up an amended schedule for Columbia, where the kids would be coming in a couple of hours later than usual, like with a snow delay – partial day, reduced class times. That gave Terry and Mike Kzuzdal a good hour or more to meet with the staff and

debrief folks before the kids showed up. They also wanted to be thoroughly prepared to meet whatever emotional needs the kids might have, so they brought in an additional 30 counselors from all over the area for that. If everybody came back, which was unlikely, they'd have upwards of 1400 kids, and if even a quarter of them were having problems and wanted to talk to someone, those counselors were going to have a busy, amended day.

John Sawchuk felt like he was moving along in a dream world. People were trying to act like it was a normal school day, but it was far from that. His office phone was ringing off the hook, with reporters trying to set up interviews with him and sectional administrators calling in or showing up and lots of students coming down to hug him and thank him and give him notes and he kept breaking down, crying, in the middle of it all. "I probably got around 400 notes from kids," John estimated, "and that was just from kids. There were a couple of hundred from parents. So it helped me, I think, personally."

It turned out that only about 80% of the kids came back to school that Tuesday, but that still meant almost 1200 kids in the building, and a lot of them were upset and had serious concerns. Many had been locked down the day before for two hours or more – some were still crying about it; some were angry ("How come nobody came and told me what was going on?"); almost all on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor where the shooting had occurred had been frightened, at the very least.

Sue Owens recalled how the kids acted when they got back into school:

“That day, it was interesting with bringing everybody back. The kids, remember, they all had their stuff in the 5<sup>th</sup> period class, so in the morning they were coming to my classroom, or any other classroom, before they could go to homeroom, because they had to go and pick up their materials. And the kids who didn’t come in, we were trying to fit them on the side. We had pocketbooks; we had all kinds of stuff, you know, from when they were told to leave. So they came back. And 5<sup>th</sup> period, the crisis team was in place, and for each of us, especially the ones on the corridor where the event occurred, they sent a guidance counselor or somebody from the crisis team to be with us, you know, for us, too, because it was a major event for us and it was a major event for the kids.

“I couldn’t think of anything else, so I brought in cookies and juice for the kids. I said, ‘We’ve been through a lot together,’ and somebody asked, ‘Mrs. Owens, what about our homework about the Byzantine Empire?’ I almost said, ‘What homework about the Byzantine Empire?’ but I said, ‘If you’ve got it, I’ll take it.’ Then we tried to build up some normalcy. It had happened on a Monday, so we still had the whole rest of the week ahead of us. My philosophy was not to ignore it. I really wanted to talk about it, but not dwell on it, and every once in a while, I might have even brought it up as an example of something. Because there’s a balance there with kids – some of them want to talk about it, and some of them don’t. So you just kind of mention it, not dwell on it, and move on, which I thought was kind of a compromise, because you’ve got 30 children in there and they’re all different.”



The hardest thing for Liz Shanley was to come back that next morning. She just wanted to stay at home and rest, relax for a day and not be around the whole situation, but she also knew it would be better for the kids to come in right away and deal with it, to get over that first hump. And she couldn't help but recall how amazing the kids had been during the crisis, and how much they had helped her, so she couldn't let them down.

"They really were amazing," she remembered. "They cried, and we talked. We talked about what had happened, and I just tried to let them talk about what they were feeling. They were upset, and they were crying, and we joked a little bit, you know, because there was one boy who was absent almost every day, and I said, 'Travis, the one day you have to come to class,' and he said, 'I can't believe I'm here for this.' Just whatever they wanted to say. I was crying, too. They had told me, 'Don't worry. You did the right thing.' They were consoling me as much as I was consoling them. I said, 'Oh, I should have had you guys come up here,' but you can't second-guess yourself."

The incident had forged a tight bond between Liz and the kids. They were really sweet kids, and she wasn't going to stay home and abandon them. "We started class around 10:00, I met with them again that day, and that was very difficult, because I thought, *What am I going to say?* So we kind of just low-keyed it. I talked a little bit, you know, about what I had felt, and I encouraged them to kind of just express what they had felt and what was going on with them. By Tuesday morning, most of them were taking it pretty much in stride.

“It’s just the way kids are. They have a sense of their own immortality, which is not real, but they have a sense that no harm will come to them. They feel safe. It’s why they get into trouble in cars, I think. They don’t have a sense of danger, of impending danger to themselves, because they’ve never experienced it. So I think they have this sense that no harm will come to them, which is how they get in trouble driving.”

Mike Bennett and Noreen and the kids had finally been able to get back into their house the night of the shooting, and Mike decided to stay home on Tuesday. He was trying to relax, and process everything, but the media had other ideas about that. They chose the day after the shooting to really turn up the heat for Mike. The phone wouldn’t stop ringing. A couple of the local news stations sent crews to his house, demanding he let them in for interviews, and they got upset when Mike’s brother wouldn’t let them inside. After a while, as soon as a news truck pulled into the driveway, he’d walk out and say, “No, don’t even take your camera out. It’s not the right time.”

“It wasn’t all of them,” Mike remembered, “but there were one or two in particular who were just unbelievable. Finally, they understood and they left, but it was then that we started to feel a little bit trapped by everything that was going on. This was big, and this was something that we weren’t able to control anymore, which was really, really bothering us, because it was starting to feel a little bit like an invasion.

“My leg was really ginger. It was sore to put any pressure on it. I was having problems with that, but for the most part I was able to get around

physically pretty well. But as far as doing anything outside the house, there wasn't a lot I could do. I had all intentions of taking Tuesday off, the day after the shooting, I knew I would take that day. I had gotten a call the Monday night it happened from Trish DeAngelis to see how I was and to see how things were going. And at that point, they already knew they wanted the Grand Jury to meet that Wednesday. That ended up not happening in the end, but they wanted to know if I could come in and meet with the Grand Jury and all that kind of stuff. So I figured that Wednesday I wasn't going to get back into school."

Mike Kzuzdal thought that opening Columbia High School the day after the shooting was the right thing to do. From his years as an administrator in education, as well as from other crisis management situations in which he had unfortunately found himself centrally placed, he had learned an important lesson: You get right back on the horse that just threw you.

No one had been killed, and no one had been seriously hurt, at least physically, and that was part of Mike's reasoning. What was the alternative? It was a Tuesday, a workday for parents, and if the kids had to stay home, that would add more stress for a lot of people. Mike also believed it was a good idea to get the kids into school, where they could talk about what happened with each other, with teachers, and with counselors, if they needed to do that.

"So we decided we were going to try and open in as normal a way as possible," Mike recalled. "We delayed opening a little bit, but we got the staff in early. There were more concerns, and that was a rough meeting for them.

But we got the kids in and set up what are very traditional counseling centers. Unfortunately, the high school has been through student deaths, staff deaths, sudden deaths, those kinds of things. So the mechanisms for supporting kids we had in place, but never at that level, or with that intensity.

“What happened with the staff was I think that people had time to reflect on it. Generally speaking, the vast majority of people were thankful. The tone that I came in with, and the tone that Terry Brewer came in to the meeting with was, ‘You’ve all done a wonderful job. Thank you so much.’ It was that simple.”

In the middle of that meeting with the staff that morning, Terry Brewer had an idea that just popped into his head, right out of the blue. The Cafeteria Manager for Columbia High School walked by where they were holding the meeting, and Terry saw him. He turned to Mike and said, “Today, Mike, no one gets charged for lunch. Nobody. Free lunch.” Later on, it turned out that the simple gesture of offering a free lunch to people who were hurting was one of the best things they remembered about the whole process.

“But once we got past that part,” Mike went on, “it quickly switched back to, ‘I don’t feel safe in the building. How could this boy get in here with a gun? I want a guarantee that I’m going to be safe.’ And the 150 to 175 staff people, it wasn’t a majority of them saying that stuff. It was two or three loud voices that were just expressing fear and emotion and whatever. Basically, I told them, ‘I don’t know how he got in.’ That had been the number one question the evening before, too. How did he get in?”

“Well, he walked in. People have an illusion, I think, that they’re safer than they really are. And part of the answer with the staff over time, and with the kids, is, ‘This is one of the safest environments, statistically; you’re safer here than in your home. You’re much safer here than at the mall, or on the street.’ But people don’t accept that when it’s their kids. ‘I’m sending you my kids.’ It’s a sacred trust. That’s how they feel.

“So at the meeting with staff before the kids arrived, we were just honest, and told them what we planned to do, and they accepted what we said. And on that first day back, our staff was excellent at taking care of the kids, at comforting them, at supporting them and talking about it. What we were not good at, and what I did not anticipate, and the biggest change I would make – when I share this with other school districts and administrators – is we didn’t care enough for ourselves, the adults.”

### **A Week After the Incident**

Trish DeAngelis wanted a conviction. She was still haunted by what she had felt on her investigative tour of the crime scene at Columbia High School, and by the looks on the faces of the kids she had seen cowering in the classrooms. If John Sawchuk had not overpowered the Romano kid, it would have been a massacre. In Trish’s mind, that was not an exaggeration. She truly believed that day there was a massacre waiting to happen.

When Trish had gone over to the administrative offices of the East Greenbush Central School District on February 9, just the week before, to meet Terry Brewer and to advise him about what he should and shouldn't say to the press, she had also met John Sawchuk. "And I'll never forget this," she remembered, "this is the one thing that stands out in my mind, is meeting John, and going into this room where he was sitting at this table and he shook my hand, and somebody introduced us, and I said, 'How are you doing? Thank you very much for what you did.' And I just remember thinking that he was one of the greatest men that I would ever meet.

"And he was still in shock. Knowing, at this point in time, knowing what had happened, and how Jon Romano had raised his gun -- he had gone back to a classroom and he had raised his gun up, and it was just as he was raising that gun up to those children, a classroom filled with children, that John Sawchuk grabbed him. And I was thinking, *God, if this guy hadn't been as big as he was -- if he hadn't been that big he wouldn't have overpowered him, with Romano being such a really large kid. What could have happened?*"

As District Attorney in Rensselaer County, Trish wasn't about to let that kind of unconscionable crime go unpunished. She had spoken at length with Terry Brewer about what the school district wanted, and he had made it plain to her that, with this kind of violent crime, a strong disciplinary message needed to be sent.

Trish indicted Jon Romano within two days of his arrest. "The indictment was handed up," she explained, "which means, basically, 'Here,

Judge, we've got an indictment' - it's literally handed up to the judge -and then he read it and immediately scheduled an arraignment for Jon Romano."

Then, the day after the indictment was handed up, on Friday, Trish went back to Columbia High School and spoke to all the people who had been directly involved in the crisis. "Because the day the indictment is handed up," Trish advised, "it's public knowledge, and the media can get a hold of it, okay? So in the indictment, I put a Reckless Endangerment count for every child in the classrooms on the hall, because we found out that there was birdshot everywhere. In the classrooms, it was bouncing off walls and it could have hurt somebody. So that's a Reckless Endangerment count, and there were a lot -- I think it was finally 86 counts. And those childrens' names were in the indictment. I wanted to make sure that the parents and the kids understood that once that indictment was public, the media could come knocking on their doors and say, 'You're a named victim. How do you feel?' And I just wanted them to be prepared for that, and to understand what it meant when they were crime victims."

Terry Brewer and Mike Kzuzdal set up a meeting in the high school auditorium, and they invited all the kids and their parents, as well as the teachers who were there on that floor during the shooting and who had been named in the indictments also. "This was during school," Trish remembered. "I was standing before them, and I told them who I was, and I told them about the indictment. I explained that they were all named in the indictment, and what that meant is that the media might come to their houses, and I just

wanted them to be prepared. I recommended that they not talk to the media about the case. Nothing good ever comes from talking to the media. You know, your words get twisted, and the defense attorneys can use it against you. I said, 'If you have the urge to talk to somebody, call the District Attorney's office, or talk to your mom and dad.'

"Now, when you have a room full of 80 kids, you understand that a couple of them are probably going to speak to the media. But also I understood that some of those kids were friends with Jon, so it was a situation where you had to tread lightly. And it was a sad situation, because he was a 16-year old kid, and I was sitting in a room full of kids who were his peers, and their parents, who obviously were upset. Some of them were screaming that they wanted blood -- not really, but they were saying things like, 'He's never going to get out, is he?'"

So Trish tried to explain the process to them: Jon Romano had been indicted on 86 counts of Reckless Endangerment, and 3 counts of Attempted Murder. She wanted to get them to Grand Jury the following week, by Tuesday, February 17, if possible. After that, Jon Romano would be arraigned before Judge McGrath in Rensselaer County Court, and any of them had the right to be at his arraignment, if they wanted to go. Jon Romano's attorney was E. Stewart Jones. Trish didn't believe bail would be set in this case.

"After the arraignment," she continued, "we go to the motion process, where they request all information that we have and we turn it over to them. Then they make motions to dismiss, such as they move to suppress evidence,



they move to suppress a statement that he gave. All of that stuff is standard. The judge will decide the motions and then we'll probably go to hearings and all that kind of stuff. There may be a plea. There may not be. And you may have to testify at trial."

But Trish quickly added, "The majority of the people in this room will never have to testify, because I don't need to call every single person. I could call one or two people from each classroom. So just the fact that your names and your childrens' names are in this indictment - do not be afraid. Do not think we're going to make you testify. We may need you to, but chances are that we won't, so I certainly care about how you feel about that and I don't want to add any undue anxiety to your lives. But what having your child's name in the indictment also means is that if your child needs psychological help, then you can be reimbursed through Crime Victims Board for any out-of-pocket expenses, because your child is now the victim of a crime -- a documented crime."

Mike Bennett started back to teach on February 16, a week to the day after the shooting. He was going to be working half days at the beginning, easing back in, to see how it would go. A lot of teachers and students and administrators were really welcoming, and there had been a lot of recognition and acknowledgment, from school and from the community, and all that was helping Mike's transition.

"It was nice," Mike remembered, "but there was a lot more anxiety that went with it than I ever saw coming. That was difficult. I think I made it

through three days before I just broke up. It was before the start of a class, and I said to my teaching assistant, 'Look, I'm going to need a minute.' 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. Mike Leonard was driving up to the school and he happened to see me and I lost it. I had a breakdown. Things that I didn't expect to have to deal with I was dealing with then, and it mounted up.

“Mike brought me back into the school and we sat in his office for a while. He called Terry, and Terry came right over and he said, 'Have you started talking with anybody yet?' He had given me some names, but at that point I was still too cool, calm and collected to deal with that. I was stronger than that.”

On the next day, Tuesday, Trish did go to Grand Jury. It was quicker than usual, and like nothing she had ever done before, because she had so many people there. She usually had one witness for a Grand Jury, and he or she could just sit in a conference room and wait to testify. But that day, the Court Clerk allowed her to use one of the empty courtrooms to house all the kids and their parents while they waited – it was a huge room, and it was completely filled up with people. Usually, Trish has only one victim advocate per case, but for this one, she had to have most of them just to manage all the witnesses and to keep everybody where they were supposed to be.

And on top of that, Trish had to enlist the aid of another prosecutor from her office, and they ended up splitting the witnesses between them. “I'll take

half, and you take half," she had told him, so each one prepped half the witnesses for the Grand Jury.

Trish DeAngelis put Mike Bennett and John Sawchuk in her office, trying to shield them a little from the media. Mike wanted to go down to where all the students and their parents were, and one of Trish's assistants showed them a back way into the courtroom where the kids were. "It was an all-day event, and it was a media circus," Mike said. "But it gave me an opportunity for the first time to go down and to see some of the kids who were involved in it, and some of the teachers who were in that hallway. It was the first time I was able to talk to them.

"So we went down the back way and got into the room, and then one of the pages, or whoever was escorting the kids into the Grand Jury room, came and said, 'Look, the media has found our back way into this room. It's going to be tough to get out of here now.'

"John and I knew we weren't testifying until near the end, so it was like, 'Oh, my God. Our wives are upstairs. We can't stay down here.' So we tried to scurry out, but the press was all over the place, just all over John and I, and it was a pain in the butt. We got back upstairs and we started talking about it and said, 'Jeez, I wish they would just let us answer questions so we can just get this over and done with,' and put an end to all the speculation about how we're doing and what was going on and all that kind of stuff. We knew we couldn't talk much, but we felt that if we could just say something, they'd get off our backs and we could get back to doing what we needed to do."

While Trish had been building her case, readying her witnesses and assigning her assistants to survey all the evidence, E. Stewart Jones, one of the best-known defense attorneys in the Capital Region, was gathering information he thought was essential to preparing his defense. He and his associates were busy interviewing Jon Romano at the Rensselaer County Jail, as well as all of Jon's family members, not only to get a wealth of details about who Jon was but also to establish a frame of reference. What Stew Jones learned pretty quickly was the following: that Jon's mother, Lorraine Barde, had purchased the shotgun he had used in the shooting at Columbia, that Jon's father did not live with the family and he and Jon were effectively estranged from each other, and that Jon Romano was a deeply-troubled, 16-year old boy. But Stew Jones also found out enough to hold Columbia High School responsible for not handling Jon effectively.

"I don't know that they knew what they should have known about the family and about Jon," Stew Jones postulated. "They certainly had signs and warnings that there was a problem, one that they did not address adequately or effectively, actually rejecting Mrs. Barde's concerns and requests. Jon was evaluated by counselors at the school, and their conclusions certainly suggested to them that Jon had issues, but the school failed Jon. There's no question about that. They failed the family and they failed Jon."

And Stew also felt that the doctors and psychiatrists that Jon had seen had failed him as well, and he believed that the way they had prescribed multiple medications, which they failed to monitor well enough, were

contributing, causative factors in the case. “The March preceding this incident, Jon was institutionalized at Four Winds in Saratoga, because they felt he was suicidal and was going through almost a psychotic, depressive period,” Stew explained. “At that point in time, he was placed on medications and referred to doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists who really did not address Jon’s needs effectively.

“Their response to changing moods and attitudes during those ongoing depressive periods was simply either to change the medications or increase the dose. There really was a failure of the evaluative process and the treatment process. I think they were treating symptoms rather than assessing the depths of the problem and investigating it and then attempting to treat it effectively by treating it at its root rather than treating the symptoms.

“Jon continued active psychiatric, psychological, medical and pharmacological care from the Four Winds period through November of that year when he turned 16, and they felt that he was getting better. Everybody thought he was getting better. But what was happening was that the medications were working, but nobody knew why and no one was assessing what worked best at what level – what medication.

“But when this incident happened, in Jon’s family’s medical cabinet, there were vials and vials of various medications prescribed to him by psychiatrists and psychologists who were seeing him. But it was classically illustrative of the fact that they simply were not paying attention. Instead of prescribing something new, they should have taken back what they had

prescribed earlier. He had a medicine cabinet full of stuff. There was absolutely no control over what he was taking or how he was taking it or when he was taking it. He fooled himself and he fooled the doctors, and the doctors simply didn't pay attention."

So Stew Jones was convinced early on that Jon Romano should not be convicted of the crimes for which he had been indicted, primarily because he maintained that Jon had no intention of harming anyone other than himself on February 9, 2004, that he had set out to commit suicide that Monday, and because the psychiatric medications he was taking *en masse* had a profound impact on his conduct in Columbia High School that day.

### **A Month After the Incident**

Terry Brewer had promised that his 80-member Community SAVE Committee would have recommendations for the East Greenbush Board of Education in about three weeks, and they did.

*(Memoranda and summary of SAVE Committee meetings, as well as their conclusions, recommendations, and priority items, are presented in Appendix E.)*

Terry felt the committee was not only extremely efficient, but he concluded that the process had done just what he wanted it to do – it had helped to heal the wounds that the incident opened up in the entire

community, and it had allowed Terry and the other administrators in the East Greenbush Central School District to understand their own system better.

Specifically, Terry noted, "I think they learned from us about good protocol and practice, and I think we learned from them that they felt more comfortable, quite frankly, with electronic surveillance-type things. They wanted cameras. We talked about metal detectors, and they eventually said, 'No, we don't want that. But we want more people involved in watching our kids, and being interactive, and calling home.'

"We worked closely with this committee. We had to report back to the Board of Education. Within that three-week period, the Board looked at the suggestions, implemented many of those things immediately, and still are working on some of the things -- different types of programs on bullying, for instance. Staff was a big issue, so we increased staff around the building to just reassure people, and we eventually put some cameras into the high school, and some similar things of that nature.

"We are putting into place more communications - in regard to not only communicating with the public, but also in a hotline type approach - so that we will have the availability for any adult or student or community member to call in with important information, any time of the day, seven days a week. That information will then be transferred back to us for response. It's very important to be listening and to hear what the communication is.

"So we did all those things. The general read, I thought, from the community was that they were totally supportive. They were originally angry

and apprehensive about what had occurred and, like any parent, they had the right to feel that, and that was justified, but I think after they saw how we were intervening and handling the situation, they became more confident about us. That was the good thing that came out of it.”

And while Terry appreciated many of the recommendations for more technological and physical changes to the high school, and worked to implement those changes, he didn’t necessarily agree with all of them. “There will be requests that you install all kinds of technology in your school,” Terry advised, “to go to wands, to install security gates, to hang video cameras all over the place, if you don’t have them. That is a policy issue that must be discussed closely. There are more ramifications to those types of systems than you may think. If you put a camera in your building, what are your policies for its use? Who can view that video? How will it be disseminated and shared if it becomes a foible item (an item whose content can be requested under the Freedom of Information Law)? So as you start to look at these things, you have to think not only about the installation of a particular type of technology, but also about the long-term impact and how that will affect policy.”

And Terry Brewer will also emphasize, again and again, his belief that there is no substitution in schools today for human investment -- human resources, not technological resources. It’s people to people contact, good listening, and human-to-human intervention that’s going to make the difference. People. That’s what Terry fervently advocates: It’s people who are going to make the difference in your school.



“I think the most important thing was people coming to forums and saying, ‘We need more people; we need more human contact.’ We added our Dean of Students at the high school; we added more staff; we added more counseling district-wide. That was a big investment for this community to step up to take, particularly in difficult financial times. And yet they did it. They’re behind our kids, and they’re behind our schools, and that’s the important thing. Those are the things that kind of make a difference here.”

However, at Columbia High School, it was becoming increasingly more difficult, as the days wore on, to know what measures would work to help some of the people who were working there.

Mike Kzuzdal was surprised at how difficult the process of recovery continued to be: “For me, personally, the hardest part of this was between after that first day of classes, the day after the shooting, and the next month or so. Because one of the things that I’ve learned, and I think we’ve learned as a district, is that we’re in a kid business, a people business. As I’ve said before, we weren’t good at taking care of the adults in the building, and we saw over the next few weeks -- I don’t know what the right words are, the fear, the emotion -- manifest itself in all kinds of ways. In-fighting between certain groups of people: People who were close to the situation and those who weren’t; people standing on the sidelines and saying, ‘I’m sick and tired of this bullshit, I’m not going to do this anymore, change the subject, let’s put this behind us;’ and other people saying, ‘I’ve got to have complete assurance that I’m going to be safe when I walk through the door. I still don’t feel safe here.’

“You’ve got to know this building a little bit,” John Sawchuk explained. “We have great people in this building but, I mean, just sitting back and seeing how some staff reacted was just incredible. Just a lot of anger, and a lot of finger-pointing.

“At that point, me and Mike Bennett had been invited to do various things in the community. People wanted to thank us and everything else. Mike was a union rep, and I was an administrator, and we’d always gotten along real well together, but part of the issue of this whole building is that we never seemed to come together as a group. Administrators and teachers – there’s always been a lack of trust. So we were thinking, *Yeah, this is going to bring us together. We pull together on this and . . .*

“Well, it was just the opposite. The finger-pointing started, and there was a lot of anger. Terri Brewer had talked about doing a recognition for all the staff that had played such a large role in keeping kids safe, and there were teachers who were saying, ‘I don’t want to go.’

‘Why wouldn’t you want to go?’

‘You know, because they’re doing this and they’re doing that just for outside people, so that they can show off about what we’ve done.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked them. ‘One of your colleagues got shot.’

“It was just crazy. Some of the things that happened -- there were some other things that happened that I just don’t forget.”

So Mike Kzuzdal went to the Superintendent and laid out the problems for him. "And then we backtracked," Mike recalled, "and we brought in some crisis management people from the outside. We still have a number of staff people who are receiving some counseling, and to this day it has changed me. So when I say it was the hardest part – you know, the initial chaos was tough, yes, and the management of things, yeah, but you kind of felt you were at least doing something. But after that first full day after the shooting where we thought, 'Whew, we're doing well,' and we were, but we were doing well for the kids. We weren't doing well for ourselves. And we didn't recognize that.

"That single event has changed the relationship of the administrative team in the building. One member was in one room, and other members were not there, and it has changed the dynamic to this day. In some ways, those relationships will never be the same. As a matter of fact, I know they will never be the same. There's some hidden resentment because of publicity – 'I did this. You did that. Why are you getting this publicity and I'm not?'

"I have an administrator in the building that can't stand, physically cannot be in a place, where that recognition is going on, partially because of envy, but also partially because of the way that some of that adoration is being received and then exuded by the people getting the adoration. So, for me, all told, sitting here today, that's the most powerful piece, that I will never be able to get back to that place we had before with that group of people.

"One of the assistant principals is very well thought out on that. He has talked to the group of us, and we've talked about it. A few of us have talked

about it *ad nauseam*, and we all recognize it. God bless us for the day of the event and all that kind of thing, but in hindsight that's the easy stuff, because when you've managed the crisis, the rest hits the fan. I'm a pretty good manager, and I have some experience in crises, and I have a good amount of people around me who know what they're doing and are supportive. But I got into, and the whole district got into, some territory we were not familiar with."

One of the people Terry Brewer was most worried about was Mike Bennett. Mike had been struggling since the week he tried to come back and teach, and he was acting stubborn about seeing a counselor, or about talking with any professional about it. Mike coached basketball, and he was an athlete himself, and it seemed to Terry like he just thought he could handle this all by himself. Terry knew he couldn't. He had seen what was going on, and he took an unusual step: Terry called and made the appointment for Mike to talk to somebody.

"It was great," Mike Bennett remembered. "It was something that I needed to do. From there on out I worked with a sub for the months of March, April and May - working half days when I could, and that kind of thing, and Terry was just great. And I thought I had dealt with everything. Things were good. Things were starting to settle down, even though there was the whole thing with what was going to happen with the court case, and the trial, and how were we going to deal with all of that."

One by one, person by person, step by step, that's how it went for Mike Kzuzdal, for the rest of that Spring semester at Columbia High School.

“We’ve expressly gone, and I’ve enjoyed going to other school districts and telling people what happened,” Mike offered. “But trying to get the point across, I tell them, ‘Yeah, do your preparation. Have your plan in place. That’s essential. You do the tabletop exercises, you do the incident command training, you get to know your local police agencies, you know what to do, you practice your management plan, you do all of that. But, equally important, is that you think about how you’re going to deal with your people. How is the crisis going to affect the members of your community?’

“And I don’t know that they hear that. They hear about the guns and the shooting and the training piece, but I don’t know that I really easily tell people, and give them a sense of what that other half is.”

So one of the important questions then becomes, *Is there a way to prepare for this kind of emotional crisis in personnel? Or, more specifically, Is there a different kind of counseling session that an administrator can set up where people actually get to talk about the underlying issues and problems that result from this kind of serious incident?*

Mike Kzuzdal tried to implement just that kind of session at Columbia High School with their Employee Assistance Program. The counselors they brought in were very talented and professional, and his staff talked frankly about the crisis and the emotionally difficult aftermath. And after that, a lot of faculty members told Mike it had worked, that they thought the sessions were great opportunities to talk and to gain more understanding of what had happened.

But the incident wasn't the same for everyone. "In fact, we had one gentleman," Mike remembered, "who found out later that he had actually been a few feet down the hallway away from John when John was tussling with this boy with the gun, and he knew what was going on. He heard John yelling, 'Help! I could use some help here,' and the gentleman turned around and went the other way.

"Now I don't know what I would have done in that situation, but how must he feel? So we had those kinds of things, and we've had a lot of outreach and private agencies in for counseling, and we've really tried. How do you prepare for it? I think, if a school district or building is willing to listen, I would bring in kids who have gone through it. I would bring in teachers who have gone through something like that. And if they can get that emotion and get those feelings across to those people that are really listening, that could really help.

"And it's not just kids who can tell the story. As administrators, we've talked to several school districts about this. We talked to a very small school district that was centralized - they had all their kids in one building and there was probably, I don't know, maybe a thousand kids in the building. John Sawchuk was talking to them about that day, and his presentation is very powerful because he is able to give an idea of what happened step by step, and people can identify with that. That's very powerful.

"But we want to get beyond just the crisis aspect of it, and I've tried to come up with ways to engage the teachers and the staff and say, 'These are the

things we've learned from it all.' Now this particular school was very rural. They're not about to put in metal detectors. They know their kids real well, and they know that everybody has a gun. I mean, I worked for a while in the Adirondacks, in Chestertown for five years, and that's just the way it was. Pretty much every family had a gun in the house.

"So I told them, 'Let me give you a situation that you might face. How many of you in the elementary school have kids with mom and dad separation issues? All. Where there are custodial care issues? Where there is, 'I don't have care because of . . .'

"So on some Monday morning, you're sitting in the office and you've got 300 kids in your elementary school and Johnny's dad comes in and maybe he's had a little too much to drink or maybe he's had a bad weekend with the mom or maybe the judge just cut him off from custodial care of the kids or maybe he's not paying the alimony and he's not supposed to take Susie. Whatever. But he's bound and determined to take Susie, because he's got that gun or a knife or he's just a big guy. Is your 50-year old secretary in the office going to do something? I mean, what are you going to do?"

In the meantime, Jon Romano was still in Rensselaer County Jail, awaiting trial, and considering his options. The District Attorney's first plea bargain offer was fifty years in prison.

Stew Jones had been working hard to convince Trish DeAngelis that this was a different case than she believed it was. "It was basically a medical investigation," Stew explained. "There were explanations for what happened

here that the District Attorney's office had absolutely no interest in. Jon was just beyond being juvenile. If this had happened before his sixteenth birthday, which he celebrated about three months before this happened, he would have been in a much different category, different status.

"I think it's clear that Jon's original intention was the ultimate act of killing himself, and it didn't happen, but that was one of the objectives as he started out that day. He didn't intend to harm anyone other than himself. If he wanted to, he could have done so. There was ample opportunity there. He went in to classrooms with the gun. He could have pulled the trigger. He didn't discharge the gun anywhere except in the open hall. The injury to Bennett was a ricochet and it was brought about by the pressure from John Sawchuk, who was in back of him, and behind.

"So I've always been convinced that Jon, by the time he got there, thought through what he was doing there and made a decision that he really was not going to harm anybody. But Trish DeAngelis had no interest in that. This was a high-profile, nationally-sensitive case, and she played it for all its political gain. I provided them with literature, medical literature, and pharmacological studies. During this period of time, all of this information about the impact of the anti-depressant medications on adolescents was starting to surface, and it showed how the medications acted on adolescents and caused them to act out, either inner-directed violence or external-directed violence.



“I produced for them all of those studies, all of the records from his doctors, his psychiatrists, and psychologists. I had Jon examined by a psychologist; I had him examined by a psychiatrist; I brought them those reports from those people, showing that the impact of this entire history, in combination with his medical management and the drugs he was taking, played a significant, dominating role in these events. I’m convinced that she never looked at any of it. She didn’t understand the medical, psychological, pharmacological issues in the case, and she didn’t care about them. All she saw was an opportunity to capitalize politically and publicly on this event, and she pandered to that rather than looking at it intelligently and from a broader perspective, but that’s the nature of the beast.

“But clearly the medications had a profound impact on his conduct, and were in large measure responsible for what occurred, and it’s now medically documented that this can occur. It doesn’t excuse what he did. It doesn’t constitute an insanity defense. But it was certainly a significantly mitigating factor. She wasn’t interested in Jon getting treatment; she was interested in being the avenging angel and punishing him for punishment’s sake.

“And while some jail time was certainly indicated, and I acknowledged that from the very beginning, it shouldn’t be punitive. He was only 16 years of age, and barely 16, and he had a history that supported the need for effective treatment. This was clearly not a fully volitional act. It was an act produced by circumstances that were external to him, and for which many people bore some responsibility.”

And Stew Jones felt that the East Greenbush Central School District was absolutely in support of the way Trish DeAngelis was conducting the case. “First of all, it was their school, their teachers, their students. They had to take a stance that was supportive of their position. And I think that they also had to cover their own failures with Jon as a student and as a teenaged boy. Surely they were aligned with DeAngelis, and she with them, and I think in large measure because she probably insisted on it. My view is that a school should not take the position that they took in this case -- that this was a child who they knew from their own records, their own psychological studies, their own counseling, knew that the child was deeply troubled and needed help. Instead of acting as an educational institution, they acted as an arm of a punitive district attorney’s office.”

### **Ten Months After the Incident**

The letter from E. Stewart Jones to Patricia Ann DeAngelis, Esq., District Attorney of Rensselaer County (*presented fully in Appendix D*), pleading his case that a 20-year prison sentence for his client (which is where her plea bargain offer had been firmly fixed for the last few months) was “illogical, unjust, and unfair,” didn’t work. Trish didn’t budge. She considered her offer of 20 years as a gift. If they went to trial, it might turn out to be 30 or 40 years. And Jon Romano, sitting in prison month after month, had simply given up. On November 22, Jon had accepted the offer.

Stew Jones believed that Jon was not thinking clearly. The boy had just turned 17 years of age three weeks before he accepted the plea bargain, and Stew concluded that he wanted to put it all behind him.

“He was on medications at the jail,” Stew revealed. “Paxil. I’m still not convinced that he acted rationally in making the decision. I don’t believe he did what he did with the full knowledge of what he was doing.

“I think the District Attorney was misled by Joel Ablove, who was then her First Assistant. I think he was a fundamental problem in this negotiation process. I think if she had been dealing with this independently, without his influence, it may have turned out differently. But she didn’t. I have heard from within the office, from people who are no longer in the office, who told me that Ablove was unbearable, and demanded that she not bend. He is inherently punitive. He sees the role of the District Attorney’s office is to punish rather than seek justice.

“I think that the justice system has to realize that the function of the justice system is to dispense justice, and justice does not focus exclusively on punishment. There are factors that influence conduct and that the younger the individual is, the greater the influence is likely to be. That they don’t have mature judgment. They haven’t formed the boundaries for exercising good judgment, and they are very vulnerable. You have to look at the whole picture. You can’t look at what might have been.

“Jon was punished for what could have happened there, even though no one had any knowledge as to what was going to happen there. I am convinced

and Jon states categorically that by the time he acted, he was not there to do anybody great harm. When he arrived there, he went to the bathroom and he sat there for twenty minutes or so – in a very contemplative process – and I think that while in that bathroom he made a decision that he was going to shake things up and make a statement, but he wasn't there to harm anybody."

On Tuesday, December 21, 2004, Jon William Romano was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Some people in the courtroom applauded, and others shouted out their disapproval. Jon signed away any ability to appeal for five years, and he will not be eligible for parole until he is 33 years old.

East Greenbush Police Chief Chris Lavin was outspoken in what he believes about the case. He felt first of all that the defense's argument that Jon had not been properly supervised in the taking of mood and mind-altering drugs was "a lot of crap. I don't believe that. There's thousands, there's tens of thousands of kids who take medicines . . . but, of course, he went to Four Winds. He was actually admitted. There's maybe not tens of thousands of kids around here who have been admitted to Four Winds, but there are certainly tens of thousands of kids who have emotional problems, and they don't all choose to bring a gun into school.

"The problem Mr. Jones had is that he failed to sell his own client on the importance of doing what he was told, which was not accepting the twenty years. That's his failure to be a lawyer convincing enough to convince his own client. I think Jones ended up pleading to the court of public opinion, and ended up lashing out at the District Attorney's office because the DA

prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and pounded the table, demanding the maximum penalty and etc., etc. So not only did Jon not take his lawyer's advice, but Jon was in the grip of a DA who talked a Grand Jury into indicting 86 counts.

"I don't mean, by any stretch, to diminish the terrible crime committed here and the potential for absolute catastrophe. We certainly know that Jon Romano wasn't thinking straight, because nobody in their right mind ruins their own life and tries to ruin the lives of so many other people, if they have a firm grip on reality. Jon Romano does not have a firm grip on reality. Now I don't know what some psychiatrist will diagnose him as suffering from, or what mental defect he qualifies for in a catalogue of mental diseases and defects of people known to the science of psychiatry, if in fact there is an actual science of psychiatry. But whatever it is, Jon Romano was certainly not in his right mind.

"He could have killed twenty-five people, because he had enough ammunition to kill twenty-five people. He had birdshot, and in order to kill somebody with birdshot, at fairly close range, you need to discharge one round of birdshot into a lethal portion of the person's body – the face, the head – at fairly close range, say ten feet. The birdshot is almost like a powder. It's tiny granules, tiny lead granules. It's birdshot – it's meant to kill birds without blowing them up so they are no longer usable as game, okay? So he had twenty-five cartridges, so he could have killed twenty-five people, if he had gotten close enough to them.

“He could have injured all kinds of people. He could have shot once into a classroom full of people and could have wounded them. He could have wounded eighty people, but he couldn’t have killed eighty people. I mean, when Jon plead guilty, he should have only plead guilty to the number of people that he was armed and ammo’d to kill. He should have said to the DA, ‘Okay, I’ll plead guilty to twenty-five counts of reckless endangerment, but I couldn’t have killed anymore than twenty-five, so why should I plead guilty to eighty?’

“He didn’t even have the capacity to know how many people he could have killed. The first shot he fired in the hallway at Columbia High School was the first time he had even fired that gun, as far as I know, and it was the first time he had ever fired any gun. He didn’t even buy that gun.”

Trish DeAngelis was satisfied with the sentence of 20 years. “In the end, the offer was twenty years,” she stated, “and he accepted it. You know, Joel Abelove, he’s my deputy, he told me that on the day of sentencing, Jon’s father came down and thanked him for that, for giving him that. I think Jon may have just been living with his mother, Lorraine Barde. His father was out of the picture, though.

“It was a very difficult case. I’ll tell you that I was relieved in the end that the kids didn’t have to go through it, because it’s hard enough for an adult to testify in court, but when a child has to come into a courtroom and face a person who has done such horrible things to them, that’s something you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy. It’s a horribly difficult thing, and when

you talk about trauma, you're asking these children to re-live a day that they have a right to forget. And to not only just talk about it, but to talk about intimate, very deep details about a day that they would much rather forget.

"Now one of the things that I mentioned at the sentencing, which Mr. Jones got all upset about was, at the jail, the corrections officers talked about Jon laughing, laughing, laughing at the people crying on television. He thought it was funny that he was hurting all these people. And I put some of that in the 7-10-30 notice that you can get from the Court Clerk. We went down to the jail after arraignment to find out what other statements he had made to corrections officers. Sometimes those are things we overlook, but on the big cases, we always do that. Defendants always talk to somebody in jail. They got nothing but time on their hands, so they'll make little statements here or there.

"I think it was a miracle that nobody was killed at Columbia High School. I absolutely do. You know, people will always criticize what you do, but when people criticize the plea bargain in this case, I just think, *You're so short-sighted: you're thinking of what happened, not what could have happened, and what the intent was.* And that's what you have to look at as a prosecutor – what was this person's intent? He certainly didn't bring a loaded shotgun into school, with all those extra rounds, by accident. He had an intention to kill that guy, and he did everything in his power to do it."

Terry Brewer feels that everyone is vulnerable at this point in time, almost anywhere. "You can ride a bus in London and be vulnerable, or a train, or a plane, a mall down in Washington, DC, where somebody is disgruntled

and walks in. We have a lot of areas that are vulnerable, and schools are designed to be open, receptive places, not closed places, and that creates opportunities for people who want to commit violence.

“So what does it force us to do today in our schools? We have single points of entry. We have cameras in our schools. The bottom line is that all those technology things are only devices that will eventually give you historical perspective, so to say. The real action you have to take is in intervention. You’ve got to have human resources. We’re a human resource business. We don’t deal with widgets. When we find students who are having difficulty, we’ve got to have early intervention.

“Quite frankly, our society and our environments today, I think, can test individuals severely, so their responses to stress can escalate to more physical and more violent responses. What is portrayed today in movies, TV, or whatever -- even in personal family interactions where there’s dysfunctional families – a problem usually turns into a loud, disruptive, violent-type response, and then gets worse. I think kids today tend to strike out more. The response is more with frustration and anger.

“When I was growing up, there was less of that. Less pressure, and then the response was maybe talk it out first and this is that. I think we see much more today in school the response is striking out before talking it out. There used to be much more respect for everybody. I think that’s what we need to work on more and more in our schools is that respecting and understanding of different cultures, different people, different circumstances.”



Linda Way, whom Jon had liked enough as a teacher to not enter her room that fateful Monday morning, remembered how Jon had reminded her of her own troubled son: "I had conversations with Jon that would lead me to believe that he was a sad person, but not violent. Not a romantic, and I know that's maybe not the right term, but I know my own son went through a lot of problems. And I remember when he was in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Grades, being so angry that he was in the stage of romanticizing drugs and hadn't gotten past, 'Yes, I'll reform in the future.' There was still this image of a romanticized notion of the bad boy. So Jon rekindled that thought in me of my own child, though I never suspected drugs or alcohol with him particularly.

"He was a nice-looking boy, who looked unapproachable, because of his posture and the way that he would hold himself. And, as I said, his lack of affect: there was very rarely a smile, or agony. There was just a blankness. But I didn't see evil in there. I never saw that. I just saw somebody who was depressed, because I guess one of the things we do understand as we get older, that depression has very little to do with sadness.

"I do think there's something about young people that just doesn't always know the consequences, doesn't think beyond. They can drive too fast. They can drink too much. They don't have the idea that when you're dead, it's forever. Or they feel things so strongly that the peace of non-existence is better than what they're suffering. It's hard to believe that, but that's my only consolation for someone I know who committed suicide.

“I know that there are those who say that almost every suicide is really an expression of murder that you can’t do, because it’s anger at someone else, and I think that can be true. But I also think that there are lives that can be so painful that nothingness is better, and I think that Jon might have been one of those people. It’s like the chipped cup where, ultimately, the tiniest chip breaks it apart. Even though it’s been dropped harder, and it was only a chip – sometimes just one more little chip, and the cup splits. And that’s maybe what had happened to him. I don’t know. I don’t know. But I do think that can happen to people.”

A month after Jon Romano’s sentencing, Trish DeAngelis wrote a letter to President Bush, recommending John Sawchuk and Michael Bennett for a Presidential Commendation, which they received, along with the Carnegie Medal from the prestigious Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, during 2005.

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# Appendices

**Appendix A:**

**A Brief History  
of  
School Violence  
in  
America**

Researching specific acts of school violence throughout 400 years of recorded American history, from the colonial era to the present day, is an impossible task. The Federal Bureau of Investigation initiated its Uniform Crime Report in 1933, so before that year there wasn't a federal system for chronicling individual acts of violence. Moreover, juvenile delinquency and crimes by children didn't become a matter of broad public concern until the 1950s, and community leaders and school district administrators more often than not worked to minimize the knowledge of these acts whenever they could, for obvious reasons.

Because most school districts did not keep comprehensive data on crimes in their schools until the 1970s, information about what happened in any given school in any state on a particular day remains anecdotal at best. Even since the SAVE legislation was enacted in 2000 and specific, detailed reports about incidents of school violence have become obligatory, reporting procedures and compliance continue to vary widely from school to school.

Apart from these limitations, there are thousands of violent incidents that now occur and are reported every year in New York State alone. The following list of events only chronicles some of the more serious and well-known occurrences of school violence in America over the last 100 years, and also serves to demonstrate that school violence is also perpetrated by adults in schools. This brief history of school violence in America is included here to provide perspective for the specific incident precipitated by Jon Romano on February 9, 2004.

### **May 18, 1927: Bath, Michigan**

Andrew Kehoe, Treasurer of the School Board, placed dynamite in the basement of the new school building in this village of 300, eight miles northeast of Lansing. He detonated the explosive shortly after the morning bell had called classes together. 45 people, mostly children, were killed and 58 were injured. Kehoe was seeking revenge after the local bank



foreclosed on his farm. He had complained to other school board members that the taxes for the new school had made it impossible for him to pay his mortgage.

A short time before the school blast, Kehoe also destroyed his own house and barn, a mile or so out of town. Kehoe himself was killed, together with Emory E. Huyck, Superintendent of the school, in a third explosion, this one in Kehoe's car as it stood in front of the demolished school a half hour after the disaster there.

### **September 15, 1959: Houston, Texas**

Paul Orgeron, a tile-setter from South Houston, had been attempting to enroll his son Dusty into the Edgar Allan Poe Elementary School on September 14, but the boy was denied admission because Orgeron lacked a birth certificate for him. The father stated he would return the next day with the necessary documentation and then left the school.

The next day, around 10:00 AM, Orgeron and his son approached a teacher who was about to enter one of the classrooms. He was carrying a brown suitcase. Orgeron handed her two pieces of paper and asked her to read them. According to the teacher, the papers were completely illegible. While she tried to read the notes, Orgeron mumbled under his breath about "having power in a suitcase," and the will of God.

He then asked that all the children gather into a circle around him. The teacher became suspicious after seeing a mysterious button on the bottom of the suitcase. Seeing her distress, other teachers joined her, and Orgeron was asked to leave school grounds. When he refused, the teachers began to hurry the children away from Orgeron, and shortly thereafter Orgeron detonated the briefcase. Police afterwards estimated it contained five or more sticks of dynamite. The explosion claimed six lives, including both Orgeron and his son.

Orgeron had been living in a boarding house under the pseudonym of Bob Silver, with his son, for several weeks before the massacre. They were said to have been quiet and never made any trouble.

## **August 1, 1966: Austin, Texas**

From the roof of the 27-story tower at the University of Texas at Austin, Charles Joseph Whitman shot passersby in the city and on the campus below. He had killed his mother and his wife the night before. Whitman killed 15 people and wounded 31 others before he was killed by Austin police. He was 25 years old.

When he was 6, Charles Whitman had scored 138 on an IQ test, and at 12 became the youngest boy to ever become an Eagle Scout. Six years later, when he was 18, Whitman joined the Marine Corps. He was accepted into the mechanical engineering program at the University of Texas at Austin in 1961 and received a USMC scholarship. However, after he shot a deer, dragged it into his dorm room and skinned it in the shower, his scholarship was revoked. Whitman returned to the Marine Corps, was court-martialed in 1963 for gambling and possessing a personal firearm on the base, and was finally honorably discharged in 1964.

He eventually returned to the University of Texas as an architectural engineering student, but had to work to put himself through school. During an interview with a campus psychiatrist there, he made a remark about feeling the urge to "start shooting people with a deer rifle" from the University tower. In the autopsy, doctors found a cancerous brain tumor that would have affected Whitman's limbic system.

## **December 30, 1974: Olean, New York**

At 2:45 on the afternoon of December 30, a 17-year old Regents scholar named Anthony Barbaro carried two guns into his high school and climbed to the third-floor. There he shot out the lock on the student council room door and set off a smoke-bomb in the hallway. Though the school was closed for the holidays, two girls saw him and reported him to a school custodian. The custodian gestured to Anthony through the glass in the door, and Anthony shot him in the heart.

Soon after, the school fire alarm went off, and Anthony began shooting from the third-floor windows. . He shot a 25-year-old divorced mother of four driving by in her car. He killed a 58-year-old gas meter reader. Then, when firefighters responded to the alarm, Anthony shot at them. Twelve others were wounded by gunshot or broken glass.

By 4:30 pm, after more than 100 local and state police officers arrived and repeatedly urged him to surrender, Anthony laid his 30-06 rifle and shotgun on the floor. The police approached the upstairs room cautiously and threw a tear gas grenade through the window. They found Tony on the floor coughing from the fumes despite the fact that he was wearing a mail order gas mask, but listening to "Jesus Christ Superstar" through his headphones. When a school guard, Michael Barbaro, saw Tony's face he cried out, "Oh, my God, that's my nephew."

Anthony was a scholarship winner, a member of the National Honor Society, a lover of reading, and oldest boy in a close-knit family of six. He helped his younger sisters and brothers and had never caused any trouble. He worked 20 hours a week as a bus boy in the same restaurant where his mother was a cashier, and where he was always prompt and ready to help. He had planned on becoming a scientist or engineer. Anthony Barbaro hanged himself in his cell the day before his trial was to begin.

### **January 29, 1979: San Diego, California**

16-year old Brenda Ann Spencer was given a rifle for Christmas in 1978. One month later, she carried it out of her house, crossed the street to Grover Cleveland Elementary School in the San Carlos section of San Diego, and started shooting. By the time police finally stopped her, six hours later, she had killed two adults and wounded eight children and a police officer.

Her answer to why she had done it was: "I don't like Mondays. This livens up the day. I had no reason for it, and it was just a lot of fun. It was just like shooting ducks in a pond. They looked like a herd of cows standing around; it was really easy pickings."

Although Brenda claimed that she was drunk and on PCP at the time of the shooting, and that her father had sexually abused her as a child, she was sentenced to 25 years to life for the shootings, and is up for parole again in 2009. She has also claimed that the State and her attorney conspired to hide her drug test results.

### **September 26, 1988: Greenwood, South Carolina**

James William Wilson Jr., 19, opened fire in the cafeteria of Oakland Elementary School, killed Shequilla Bradley, 8, and wounded eight other children with a 9-round .22 caliber pistol. He went into the girls restroom to reload and he was attacked by Kat Finkbeiner, a Physical Education teacher. James shot her in the hand and mouth. He then entered 3rd grade teacher Paisy Higgenbotham's classroom and wounded six more students. Wilson dropped the gun and surrendered to Kat until police arrived. James William Wilson Jr., had been taking several prescribed psychiatric drugs at the time, including Valium, Halcion, and Xanax.

### **May 1, 1992: Olivehurst, California**

Eric Houston, 20, entered his former high school in Olivehurst, California and took a number of students hostage. Using a pistol, he killed four students and wounded ten others. Houston had failed a grade at school and was unable to find a good job. "My HATEtrid tord humanity forced me to do what I did," Houston wrote. "Maybe I did it to open up somebody's eyes to see some of the stuff that goes on . . . of how the school works, and make them understand a little bit some of the stuff I went through . . . It seems my sanity has slipped away and evil taken it's place."

Eric Houston was sentenced to die for the shooting. "Detention: The Siege at Johnson High," a 1997 film that was re-named "Hostage High" after the shootings at Columbine, is based on the Eric Houston story.

### **October 1, 1997: Pearl, Mississippi**

When he was 16, Luke Woodham brutally beat and stabbed his mother, 50-year old Mary Woodham, at their home in Pearl. Luke then drove his mother's car to his high school. He wore a long coat to conceal a rifle held underneath. He began shooting as soon as he entered the school, killing his ex-girlfriend, Christina Menefee, and her friend, Lydia Dew. Luke then shot seven other students before Joel Myrick, the Assistant Principal, went and got his own pistol from his car and subdued the boy.

When Myrick asked Woodham why he did it, Luke answered, "Life has wronged me, sir." At his trial, Luke claimed that he couldn't remember killing his mother before he went to the high school that day. Luke Woodham pled insanity as a defense, but the jury rejected that plea, and Luke is currently serving a sentence of life in prison.

### **December 1, 1997: West Paducah, Kentucky**

On the first day of December, 14-year old Michael Carneal wrapped two shotguns and two rifles in a blanket and took them to Heath High School, about 10 miles outside of Pearl. He pretended the guns were props for a school play. He also carried a loaded .22 pistol in his backpack.

Carneal rode to school with his sister and arrived at approximately 7:45 a.m. When he entered the school's lobby, he inserted ear plugs and pulled the pistol out of his bag. He fired 8 rounds in quick succession at a youth prayer group. Three girls were killed, and five other

victims were wounded; one of the wounded was left a paraplegic Five of the victims were shot in the head, and three were hit in the upper torso.

After seeing that he had killed a friend of his, Nicole Hadley, Michael placed his pistol on the ground and surrendered to the school principal, Bill Bond. Carneal was sentenced to three concurrent life sentences for 3 counts of murder and an additional 120 years for 5 counts of attempted murder.

### **March 24, 1998: Jonesboro, Arkansas**

Cousins Mitchell Johnson, 13, and Andrew Golden, 11, both middle-schoolers at Westside Middle School in Craighead County, pulled the fire alarm at the school and then hid in the woods nearby. The two opened fire on students and teachers as they left the building.

On the morning of the massacre, Johnson and Golden, each dressed in army-style camouflage, stole a van from Johnson's home. It was loaded with camping supplies, food, and seven weapons -- two semi-automatic rifles, one bolt-action rifle, and four handguns, all of which had been stolen from Golden's grandfather's house. Mitchell Johnson, who apparently had been jilted by a girlfriend the day before the shootings, told a friend that he "had a lot of killing to do."

Four middle-school students -- Natalie Brooks, Paige Ann Herring, and Stephanie Johnson, all 12, and Brittheny R. Varner, 11 -- died. Teacher Shannon Wright, 32, died after surgery on Tuesday night from wounds to her chest and abdomen. 11 other students were also wounded. Johnson and Golden were both convicted of murder in juvenile court, but can only be incarcerated until they're 21.

## May 20 & 21, 1998: Springfield, Oregon

Kipland Philip Kinkel's father had given him a 9 mm Glock pistol as a present, but he didn't have that with him when he was expelled from Thurston High School on May 20, 1998. The Glock was at home, in his bedroom. A stolen .32 Beretta was discovered in Kip's locker, though, and that's why he was thrown out of school. Angry, mortified, and desperate, Kip went home and killed his parents, Bill and Faith Kinkel. He shot both of them in the head and covered them with sheets. Kip was 15 years old.

On the coffee table in the living room, Kip left a handwritten confession which included the following statements: "I have just killed my parents. I don't know what is happening. I love my mom and dad so much. I just got two felonies on my record. My parents can't take that! It would destroy them. The embarrassment would be too much for them. They couldn't live with themselves. I'm so sorry. I am a horrible son. I wish I had been aborted. I destroy everything I touch. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I didn't deserve them. They were wonderful people. It's not their fault or the fault of any person, organization, or television show. My head just doesn't work right. God damn these VOICES inside my head. I want to die. I want to be gone. But I have to kill people. I don't know why. I am so sorry.! Why did God do this to me. I have never been happy. I wish I was happy. I wish I made my mother proud. I am nothing! I tried so hard to find happiness. But you know me I hate everything. I have no other choice . . ."

On the morning of May 21, Kip got dressed, reloaded the .22 he used to kill his father and the .22-caliber semiautomatic he'd used on his mother and grabbed his own 9mm Glock. He taped a military hunting knife to his ankle, filled his backpack with ammunition and headed off in his mother's Ford Explorer for Thurston High School.

Kip left his mother's car outside the school and carried the weapons and his backpack inside. As he entered the school's front hallway, he pulled the rifle from under his long coat and fired. Ben Walker crumpled to the floor, dead, and Ryan Atteberry was wounded. Kip methodically continued down the hall to the cafeteria, where students gathered to study, talk or goof off before the first bell. . He then ran into the cafeteria and fired the remaining 48

rounds from the 50-round clip in his rifle. He fired from the hip, walking across the cafeteria, wounding 24 students and killing Mikeal Nicholauson. When the rifle was empty, he tried to reload, but Jake Ryker, who was wounded, tackled him. Kip pulled out his Glock and squeezed off one more round before more students helped to wrestle him to the floor and hold him there for police.

In November, 1999, Kinkel was sentenced to more than 111 years in prison, without the possibility of parole.

### **April 20, 1999: Littleton, Colorado**

The shootings at Columbine High School may be the most notorious incidents of school violence in the history of America. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 fellow students and one teacher, wounded 24 others, and finally committed suicide to end the vicious rampage through their high school.

Three years before the massacre, Eric Harris created a website on AOL. He had a private blog on the site, and he used that to record journal entries, jokes, and his random thoughts about school, friends and parents. Soon, however, Harris began to add information on how teens could cause trouble, and even included instructions on how to make explosives. Late in 1997, Harris started posting threats against teachers and other students at Columbine High School. He also wrote angry statements about society in general and expressed his desire to kill people who annoyed him.

Early in 1999, Harris put up a hit list on the site, and said he had completed a number of pipe bombs. Investigator Michael Guerra of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office knew about the site, and after he learned about the pipe bombs, Guerra drafted an affidavit for a search warrant, but it was never filed nor was a search ever carried out. After the shooting, the Sheriff's Office tried to conceal the existence of the affidavit, and the public only learned of it after an investigation by the television show, "60 Minutes," in September of 2001.



Other warning signs included the arrest of Harris and Klebold in 1998 for stealing computer equipment from a parked van. A judge decided the two boys needed psychiatric counseling, and allowed them to participate in a “diversion program” that stipulated community service and counseling at a local youth recreation center. Both publicly expressed remorse about the crime but, privately, Harris was boasting to friends that he had feigned the remorse and was secretly thrilled at his ability to deceive the authorities. During an evaluation by doctors during this period, Harris was prescribed Luvox, an anti-depressant. Some analysts have argued that this medication may have contributed to Harris' actions, and claimed that side-effects of these drugs include increased aggression and loss of empathy.

Harris and Klebold were released from their community service program in April of 1998. In the following twelve months, they bought a 9 mm semi-automatic rifle, two pump-action 12-gauge shotguns, and a 9 mm semi-automatic handgun. They built 99 improvised explosive devices, and sawed the barrels and butts off the shotguns so they could conceal them under their long coats.

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold drove separate cars to Columbine High School. Wearing long, black trenchcoats, they met and then entered the cafeteria at approximately 11:10 am., and left duffel bags full of bombs that were armed to explode at 11:17 there. Harris and Klebold then returned to their cars and waited for the explosions, intending to shoot the students who ran out of the school after the bombs went off.

When the bombs failed to go off, they loaded their weapons into another duffel bag and a backpack and climbed to the West Entrance of the school. Harris yelled, “Go! Go!” and they both began shooting at students who were eating their lunches outside on the grass. Richard Castaldo was critically wounded and Rachel Scott was killed.

Next, Harris took off his trench coat, took out his 9 mm semi-automatic carbine, and aimed it down the West Staircase. Daniel Rohrbough and his two friends, Sean Graves and Lance Kirklin, were walking up the staircase directly below the shooters. Kirklin reported seeing them standing at the top, when suddenly they began shooting at him. Shot in the chest, Rohrbough fell back onto Graves; a bullet pierced Graves's foot.

The shooters then turned their guns on Kirklin, standing across from them. All three students fell wounded. Harris and Klebold then turned and began shooting south (away from the school) at five students sitting on the grassy knoll adjacent to the steps, opposite the West Entrance of the school. Michael Johnson was hit but kept running and escaped. Mark Taylor fell to the ground, crippled, and played dead. The other three escaped uninjured. As the shooting continued, Sean Graves stood up and limped down the staircase into the cafeteria's side entrance, where he collapsed in front of the door.

Klebold began walking down the steps heading toward the cafeteria. As he descended, he shot Lance Kirklin once more in the face, wounding him critically. Daniel Rohrbough began to struggle down the steps towards the bottom of the staircase. Seeing this, Klebold walked up to him and shot him in the back at close range, killing him. He then continued down the staircase and stepped inside the cafeteria, walking over the injured Sean Graves, who lay at the cafeteria entrance. It is speculated that Klebold did this because he was checking to see why the propane bombs had failed to explode. As Klebold stepped into the cafeteria, Harris began to shoot down the steps at several students sitting near the cafeteria's entrance, wounding Anne-Marie Hochhalter as she attempted to flee. After a few seconds, Klebold returned back up the staircase to meet with Harris at the top.

Inside the school, teacher Patti Nielson walked towards the West Entrance with student Brian Anderson. As Anderson opened the first set of double doors, Harris and Klebold shot out the windows. Anderson was injured by flying glass and Nielson was hit in the shoulder. Nielson ran down the hall into the library where she began to alert students inside, demanding they duck beneath desks and remain silent. She then dialed 911 and hid under the library's administrative counter. Brian Anderson remained behind, caught between the exterior and interior doors.

Meanwhile, a deputy sheriff arrived at the scene and began shooting at Harris and Klebold, distracting them from the injured Brian Anderson. Anderson staggered out of the area and made it into the library where he ran into an open staff break room, remaining there until the ordeal ended. Harris fired ten shots at the officer, who then radioed in a Code 33 (officer in need of emergency assistance).

When his gun jammed, Harris ran inside the school with Klebold. The pair headed turned into the Library Hallway. Moments earlier, Coach William "Dave" Sanders had evacuated the cafeteria through a staircase leading up to the second floor. He and a student turned the corner and were walking down the Library Hallway when they saw the shooters coming around the corner from the North Hallway. The two quickly turned around and ran the other. Klebold and Harris came around the corner and shot at both of them, hitting Dave Sanders in the chest as he reached the South Hallway but missing the student. The student ran into science classroom SCI-1 and alerted the teacher inside. Meanwhile, the shooters returned back up the North Hallway. Sanders struggled over to the science area where the teacher took him into an empty science classroom SCI-3. Two students administered first aid there, but paramedics were not able to enter the school until several hours later, and Sanders died from loss of blood.

As the shooting unfolded, Patti Nielson was on the phone with a 911 operator, and also trying to get students to take cover under desks. According to transcripts, her call was received by the operator at 11:25:05 a.m. The time period between when the call was answered and when the shooters entered the library was four minutes and ten seconds. Before entering, the shooters threw two pipe bombs into the cafeteria from the staircase in the South Hallway, both of which exploded. They then threw another into the Library Hallway which also exploded, damaging some lockers. At 11:29 a.m., the pair walked through the heavy doors of the library where 52 students, three library staff, and Ms. Nielson were hiding under desks and inside exterior break rooms.

As they entered the library, Harris yelled for everyone to "Get up!" Staff and students hiding in the library exterior rooms said they heard the gunmen say, "Everyone with a white

cap or baseball cap, stand up! We'll get the guys in white hats!" Wearing a white baseball cap at Columbine was a tradition among members of sports team. When no one stood up, Eric said, "Fine, I'll start shooting anyway!"

Harris and Klebold then made their way down to the opposite side of the library, to two rows of computers. Evan Todd used the time to conceal himself behind the administrative counter. Kyle Velasquez was sitting at the north (or upper) row of computers; he had not ducked down below the desk. Klebold shot him first, hitting him in the head and back, killing him. The shooters then set down their duffel bags, filled with ammunition, at the south row of computers and began reloading their weapons. After a few seconds, Klebold fired his shotgun at a nearby table, injuring Patrick Ireland, Daniel Steepleton, and Makai Hall, then took off his trench coat. Harris grabbed his shotgun and walked over to the lower row of computer desks, firing his gun underneath the first desk in the row without looking to see who was under it. The shot killed Steven Curnow, who was hiding underneath it. He then shot under the next computer desk, injuring Kasey Ruegsegger.

Harris then walked over to the table across from the lower computer row, slapped the top twice with his hand, knelt down, and said "peek-a-boo" before shooting Cassie Bernall in the head. The recoil from the weapon hit his face, breaking his nose. Harris then turned to the next table, where student Bree Pasquale sat next to the table rather than beneath it (she had not hidden underneath as there was not enough room to hide). Harris asked her if she wanted to die to which Pasquale responded with a plea for her life. Witnesses report that Harris was disoriented as this occurred, possibly from the wound to his face, which was bleeding heavily. As Harris taunted Pasquale, Patrick Ireland began to administer first aid to one of the two injured near him; seeing this, Klebold shot at him, hitting him twice in the head and once in the foot. The shot to his foot blew his shoe off. He was knocked unconscious, but remarkably survived.

Next, Klebold proceeded to walk toward another set of tables, discovering Isaiah Shoels, Matthew Kechter, and Craig Scott hiding under one. He attempted to pull Isaiah out

from underneath the table, but was unsuccessful. He then called to Harris, who left Bree Pasquale and joined him. Klebold and Harris taunted Shoels for a few seconds; witnesses claim Klebold made a racial comment towards him. Harris then knelt down and shot him in the chest at close range, killing him. Klebold also knelt down and opened fire, hitting and killing Matthew Kechter. Remarkably, Craig Scott remained uninjured as he lay in the blood of his friends, pretending to be dead.

Harris, in the meantime, went over to another table where two girls were hiding, bent down and looked at them, and dismissed them as "pathetic". The pair then went over to an empty table and began to reload their weapons. Schnurr, who had been hurt badly, began to cry out at that point, "Oh, God help me!" Klebold went back to her and asked her if she believed in God. She floundered in her answer, saying no and then yes, trying to get the answer "right". He asked her why; she said it was because it was what her family believed. He taunted her then walked away. Harris walked back over to the other side of the table where Lauren Townsend lay. Behind it, Kelly Fleming, like Bree Pasquale, sat next to the table rather than beneath it. Harris shot at her with his rifle, hitting her in the back, and killing her instantly.

At 11:37 a.m., the shooters moved to the center of the library, where they continued to reload their weapons at a table midway across the room. Klebold noticed a student nearby and asked him to identify himself. The student was John Savage, an acquaintance of Klebold's. Savage asked Klebold what they were doing, to which Klebold replied, "Oh, just killing people." Savage then asked if they were going to kill him. Klebold hesitated, and then asked him to leave the library. Savage fled immediately, making a safe escape through the library's main entrance.

At this point, several witnesses heard Harris and Klebold comment on how they no longer found a thrill in shooting their victims. Klebold was quoted to have said "Maybe we should start knifing people, that might be more fun." Both shooters then moved away from the table and began heading toward the library's main counter. Klebold slammed a chair

down on top of the computer terminal that was on the library counter, directly above the bureau Patti Nielson was hiding under. The two then walked out of the library at 11:42 a.m., ending the brutal massacre

After leaving the library, the pair went down the staircase into the cafeteria where they were first caught by the security cameras. They threw a Molotov cocktail and set off some bombs there, then left the cafeteria and went back up the stairs. Once back on the upper level, they walked around the main North and South Hallways of the school without any direction, shooting aimlessly. Several times they looked through the small windows on the classroom doors and even made eye contact with students, but never attempted to enter the rooms.

At 12:05 p.m. the shooters entered the library again, but it was empty of all living students except for the unconscious Patrick Ireland and Lisa Kreutz, who played dead. Once inside, they attempted to shoot out the windows at policemen, without success. They then moved over to the table next to where Matthew Kechter and Isaiah Shoels lay; there, they shot themselves. At 2:38 p.m., Patrick Ireland regained consciousness and crawled over to the windows, where he attempted to exit. He was then taken out of the school through the library windows by members of the SWAT team. Lisa Kreutz remained injured in the library until police entered the scene at 3:25 p.m.; she was then removed, along with Ms. Nielson, Brian Anderson, and the three staff. At 4:30 p.m. the school was declared safe; however, at 5:30 p.m. additional officers were called in as more explosives were found in the parking lot and roof. By 6:15 p.m., officials had found a bomb in a car in the parking lot. The sheriff then decided to mark the entire school as a crime scene; 13 of the dead, including the shooters, were still inside the school at the time.

### **March 5, 2001: Santee, California**

It was easy to get lost at Santana High School in March of 2001 – the school had 1900 students enrolled. One 9<sup>th</sup> Grader, Charles Andrew Williams, was not only feeling lost, but

suffered constant bullying at the hands of older school athletes. On March 5, Charles snapped. He entered a boys' restroom and started shooting with a .22 caliber revolver.

Chaos ensued during and after the shooting as students were first told to run or get into the hallways then later told to go their classrooms. Local businesses and churches were pressed into service to handle students and parents, but as one parent reported, "They just don't have a system to handle this." The local television station periodically broadcast student names, instructing them where to meet their parents as parents would contact station personnel for help.

John Sharp, a Santana student, told reporters that Williams seemed happy: "When he came back out of the bathroom, he was smiling. He was looking around and smiling with his weapon. He fired two more shots and went back in." At least three other Santana students reported that they had seen the shooter during the previous weekend, and he had told them that he was planning to go into school and to shoot people, but they never alerted any adults about what he had said, because they didn't really believe him.

Students Randy Gordon and Bryan Zuckor were both killed, and 13 other students were wounded. Two adults, a student teacher and a young security supervisor – were also wounded. Two off-duty police officers who were visiting the school were alerted to the shooting, however, they were at different ends of the school. One of them approached the bathroom and called for backup. Police officers quickly arrived and charged the bathroom; they discovered Williams kneeling on the floor with the weapon in his hands. He told officers that he was by himself. Williams surrendered peacefully and was taken into custody.

Williams, in an effort to avoid a trial, pled guilty to all charges against him on June 20, 2002. A California judge sentenced Williams, as an adult, to 50 years to life in prison, and ordered him to serve his time in the Youth Offender Program at CCI, Tehachapi until his 18th birthday, at which time he would be transferred to adult prison. Williams was given credit for the 529 days that he had served in juvenile Hall, fined \$10,000.00 and ordered to pay restitution to the Victims Restitution Fund. At his sentencing, Williams apologized and expressed remorse for his actions. He was transferred to an adult prison in March of 2004.

Currently, there are on-going efforts to have Williams' sentence reduced. His supporters claim the judge was too harsh in sentencing Williams as an adult and did not take into consideration Williams' age at the time of his offense -- 15, a minor. His supporters would like to see Williams get a new sentence, but as a juvenile which would have meant confinement in CYA until age 25. His appeals continue. Williams is currently incarcerated at Calipatria State Prison.

### **March 21, 2005: Red Lake, Minnesota**

Like Kip Kinkel in Oregon, Jeffrey Weise began his murderous rampage at his own home. He shot his grandfather, Daryl Lussier, who was a police officer, while he was sleeping. Weise then waited for Michelle Sigana, his grandfather's partner, to come home around 2:30 pm and he killed her as well. After that, Weise stole Lussier's two police-issue weapons - a shotgun and a 9 mm pistol -- and he headed for Red Lake High School on that cold Monday afternoon.

Jeffrey Weise arrived at his high school at 2:45 pm. He entered the building and was confronted by an unarmed security guard, Derrick Brun, who was manning the school's metal detector. Weise shot Brun, and then moved down the hallway, firing at anyone he encountered. He killed a teacher, Neva Rogers, five students, and he wounded seven others. Afterwards, witnesses recounted how he smiled and waved at people as he shot them. And like at Columbine, he asked one student if she believed in God before he shot her.

Finally, Weise made his way back to the school's entrance, where he engaged in a shootout with police officers stationed outside the front doors. None of the officers were hit, but Weise was wounded twice, and he dragged himself back inside the school and committed suicide. Another student believed to be involved in planning the event was arrested one week after the shootings. He was charged with conspiracy to commit murder based on several email messages he exchanged with Jeff Weise which involved plans for the



Red Lake High School massacre. The conspiracy charge was eventually dropped, though he pled guilty to transmitting threatening messages through the Internet.

### **October 2, 2006: Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania**

The most recent school shooting is tragically reminiscent of the first recorded school massacre of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – the Bath, Michigan attack. Charles Carl Roberts IV, 33, whose father was a retired police officer in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and whose mother works for a Christian organization which stages Bible plays in Strasburg, took 10 Amish girls hostage and executed five of them before committing suicide. Roberts drove a milk truck for Northwest Food Products Transportation and shared a home with his wife and children -- a daughter, 7, and sons, 5 and 18 months.

On 2 October 2006, Roberts entered the one-room West Nickel Mines School at approximately 9:51 a.m. with a 9 mm handgun, a 12-gauge shotgun, a .30-06 bolt-action rifle, about 600 rounds of ammunition, a stun gun, two knives, a change of clothes and a box containing a hammer, hacksaw, pliers, wire, screws, bolts and tape. He used boards with eye bolts and flex ties to barricade the school doors before binding the arms and legs of the 10 girl hostages. He ordered the hostages to line up against the chalkboard and released the 15 male students present, along with the teacher, a pregnant woman, and three parents with infants.

As soon as the school teacher escaped, she contacted the police, and the first police officers arrived about 10:30 a.m. They then attempted to communicate with Roberts using their squad car broadcasters, but received no answer from him. Police had to break in through the windows once shots were heard. Inside, Charles Roberts had shot all 10 of the school girls. Three of the girls died at the scene, and two more died the next morning from related injuries. Five girls were hospitalized in critical condition. Reports have stated that the girls were shot execution style in the head. The girls were between 6 and 13 years old.

Roberts was last seen by his wife at 8:45 a.m., when together they walked their children to the bus stop to go to school. When his wife returned home at 11:00 a.m., she

discovered four notes he had left to her and their children. Roberts called his wife on the phone while he was still in the schoolhouse and confessed to her that he had molested two young female relatives twenty years ago, when he was a boy of 12, and he had recently been daydreaming about molesting children again. His suicide notes stated that he was still angry at God for the death of a premature infant daughter in 1997.

# **Appendix B:**

# **Witness Statements**

## **Thomas J. Bacher**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 02/09/04

Time: 12:51 p.m.

I am speaking with Jim Zell who identified himself as a member of the State Police. I am employed as a full-time Social Studies Teacher for East Greenbush Schools at Columbia High School. Today at about 10:35 am I was eating my lunch in the Social Studies Office on the third floor across from Rooms 317 and 319. I heard what I thought was an M-80 firecracker go off. Another teacher Bill Telasky jumped up from the table and went toward the door. Another loud blasting sound came about five seconds after the first. Bill left the office and shut the door. I stood up and went to the door and opened it. I looked to my right toward Room 321 and saw a tall dark haired kid facing away from me holding a long gun. The boy started to turn in my direction, so I quietly closed the door and locked it – bracing it with a chair. I dialed 911 and told the operator what I saw. I felt that I was going to see Bill in the hallway, but he wasn't out there. I was going to call the main office also. I can't remember the exact sequence, but I heard a third shot. Shortly after that there was a banging on my door. Bill Telasky identified himself and I opened the door. The first thing I saw – John Sawchuck with the kid in a quasi-bear hug from behind – pushing him into the Social Studies office. John Sawchuk had the gun pointing down in his right hand. I took the gun from Sawchuk and he told the kid to get down on the floor. Another teacher Pete Zilgme took the gun from me and unloaded it. All of this is true to the best of my knowledge.

**Michael Bennett**  
*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 02/09/04

Time: 1:28 p.m.

Place: Albany Medical Center

That on today's date at appx. 10:30 am I was teaching Global Studies in Room #335 at Columbia High School. I heard two loud noises come from outside my classroom. I wasn't sure what the noises were but I decided to investigate. I started walking towards the orange lockers. Assistant Principal John Sawchuck was also investigating the noise and he was about 6 or 7 steps ahead of me. When I rounded the next corner I saw Assistant Principal John Sawchuck approaching a kid. The kid had his back to us. John Sawchuck asked the kid what he was doing and as he turned around I saw that he had a gun because I saw the barrel of it. As this kid turned around John Sawchuck realized he was carrying a gun and started wrestling with him to try and get it away from him. I then approached them to try and assist John in getting the gun from the suspect. When I was about 8 ft. from them they swung around. They were now facing me. I saw that the suspect was trying to free himself. The gun was pointed low and toward myself. The gun went off and I knew right away that I was hit in the leg. I fell to the ground and crawled in the nearest classroom.

John Sawchuck yelled to me that he needed my help. I yelled back that I had been hit. I then got up to see if there was anything else I could do. The new Science teacher told me that I looked pale and that I should sit down. He sat me down. The police then arrived and took control of the situation.

## Ericka Cotugno

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 3/14/03

Time: 2:05 PM

On 03/06/03 at about 2:00 PM I was in 9<sup>th</sup> period Biology class at Columbia High School. In my general area was Jon Romano, Barry Morales and Kristen Carroll. Jon was telling us a story about how he choked Barry Morales when he was drunk and how Barry started to turn blue. Barry agreed with Jon's version of what happened. After finishing his story of how he choked Barry, Jon moved his chair behind me. He sat behind me for a short time and then he grabbed me by the neck, using his arm and started choking me. This caught me completely by surprise and I had a hard time breathing. Jon never said a word to me while he was doing this. I would estimate he choked me for at least five (5) seconds. After he stopped I ran out of the room crying. I remember my neck (throat area) hurting.

On 03/07/03 at about 8:30 AM (2<sup>nd</sup> Period) I told Mrs. Gear what had happened and asked her if she saw anything. She told me she hadn't seen Jon choking me. At about 11:45 AM (3/7/03) I was called to the nurse's office. When I got there Dr. Cimma was there and he checked my neck and throat. He looked into my mouth and felt my neck. He then told me my muscles were bruised. At this point I called my mother from the nurse's office and told her what Jon did to me on 03/06/03 and what Dr. Cimma had told me.

On 03/13/03 at about 12:20 PM I was in the school cafeteria sitting at a table with Elana Scrum and Jessica Madden. Jon Romano came up to me, sat down and told me he had just broken every law there is by coming to the cafeteria. Jon was suppose to be out of school for a month and he wasn't suppose to be at school, so that was what he meant by "breaking every law." I want to say I am afraid of Jon Romano and want something done for what he did to me and something done to keep him from having contact of any kind in the future.

## **Kelli Donovan**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 12:45 p.m.

I have known John Romano since 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I am now in eleventh grade. In ninth grade I began dating John. We dated for about six months. We talked on and off until Nov. 2003. We became very close in Nov. 2003. We were friends and talked every day. I knew that he was diagnosed with depression and he was taking medication for it. He was also taking sleeping pills for his insomnia. I know that back in December 2003, he had to go to the emergency room because he overdosed on sleeping pills.

Throughout the time we were talking since November, he was not attending school. He had dropped out. He would often talk about times when he was at school. He said the principal and the asst. principal and Mrs. Greir from Biology were always lying to him and trying to get him in trouble. He brought this up several times from November 2003 to Jan. 2004.

In the past two and a half weeks we didn't have any deep conversation; he was not as open with me as before. For about the last month John often talked about guns. He kept saying that he was going to buy a gun. He said his Mom was going to buy a gun for him and also buy one for herself. I would always ask him why he wanted a gun. He would say for self-defense. He would talk about kinds of guns, but I didn't really listen. I had no idea what he was talking about. He did say he wanted a shotgun and a pistol. He always had links on his buddy profile of pictures of guns that he said he wanted.

Last Tuesday we broke up. He just called and said it wasn't working. I said ok. We didn't talk again until last night. We were chatting on instant messenger. He said he was going to e-mail me something. I checked my e-mail and he sent me a photo of him holding a long gun. I recognized that he was holding the gun in his bedroom. He said he got it from a gun store that was going out of business and he got a good deal on it. He said he bought it a day or two ago. I don't know where he bought it, but I know he was looking at a store across from Price Chopper on Route 20 in East Greenbush. He also looked at WalMart.

When I looked at the e-mail, John started telling me what kind of gun it was. I said, "Like that means something to me." John then said, "Put it this way, if I shot the wall it would put a five inch hole in it." I changed the subject and we just talked about other stuff. Then he said, "I have to go. Have fun at school tomorrow." That is the last time I heard from him.



**Travis Ellis**  
(*Witness Statement*)

Date: 2/9/04  
Time: 12:19 p.m.

On Feb. 09, 2004 I witnessed the following:

At approximately 10:40 AM I was sitting in English Class – I heard a loud bang which I didn't recognize. The whole class then ran up to the teacher's desk (Miss Shanley). Everyone laid down on the floor behind the desk. I heard the door be kicked open. I also heard the sound of a gun being cocked. I looked up and saw John walk into the classroom. John was carrying a shotgun. It had a long barrel. He was holding it with two hands across his body. John stood in the classroom near the door with the gun. He looked around the classroom. John then turned around and walked out of the classroom. Miss Shanley then ran to the door, closed it, and locked it with her key. I stayed where I was at this point. Within about 5 seconds of Miss Shanley closing the door I heard about four more loud bangs which I thought to be gunshots. The four loud bangs sounded exactly like the first bang I heard before John came into the classroom. After the four shots we all just stayed in our room in lockdown. We did not move until Mr. Scuccone came and escorted us to the South Forum. I recognized the person with the gun as soon as I saw him. I know him as John. I am not sure of his last name, but it is some kind of Italian last name. John used to go out with my friend Christina Izzo. I don't know how long they dated, but I know they just broke up a couple of days ago. I don't know John other than saying "Hi" once in a while. I know that John is always with Brad Wisher.

**Eric Farrell**  
(*Witness Statement*)

Date: 2/9/04  
Time: 11:58 a.m.

My occupation is student at Columbia High School in East Greenbush, NY. I have been duly advised by Officer Raymond C. Diaz #55 who has identified himself as a Police Officer, that I do not have to make any statement at all, and that any statement I make may be used against me in a court of law, that I have the right to talk to an attorney and I have the right to have an attorney appointed to represent me if I cannot afford one before answering any questions and that I can stop giving the statement or stop the questioning at any time for the purpose of consulting an attorney. I understand my rights and freely volunteer the following statement.

That on February 09, 2004 at around 10:50 am I was at school and I was walking to the bathroom on the second floor of the south tower. I walked down the hallway and went into bathroom. About three steps into the bathroom a guy with a black leather jacket, who I recognized as Jon Romano, a student at the school, was walking out of the bathroom towards me. He had a single barrel shotgun in his hands and he raised it up and pointed it at me. He didn't say anything. I was kinda in shock. I just looked at him and said, "Don't do this man." I turned around and walked out. I walked out of the bathroom to the left, and headed to the nearest room which was Mr. Zilgme's room. The kid with the shotgun was following me and as soon as I got in the classroom I heard a shot go off. Mr. Zilgme and I knocked over some bookshelves and a table and blocked off the door. While we were in the room I heard three more shots go off. I heard some yelling in the hallway and after a few minutes Mr. Zilgme opened the door and looked out to see if it was alright. He walked down the hallway towards the stairs. A few minutes later I went into the next classroom. I told the teacher what happened and she told me to get down on the floor with the other kids and to stay low. About fifteen minutes later the teacher called me out and I came to the Police station to tell Officer Diaz what happened. I

have given this statement on my own free will, and I have asked Officer Diaz to type it for me as I told it to him.

I have read this statement consisting of 1 page and the facts contained herein are true and correct. I understand that making a false written statement is punishable as a Class A misdemeanor pursuant to section 210.45 of the Penal Law of the State of New York.

**Steve M. Ide**  
*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 12:00 p.m.

I am a student at Columbia High School and I am in 9<sup>th</sup> Grade. I was in 4<sup>th</sup> Period Global class, Miss Owens is the teacher, at around 10:40 am sitting near the front of the room in my seat, I was facing the back of the class talking to a friend when I heard and saw a shotgun blast hit the rear wall and door just outside my classroom # 315. I heard 3 shots fired and a piece of the wall broke off and hit me in the chin, I am not injured. All then students ran to the front of the room and I was standing next to the overhead projector. Mr. Bennett dove into the room after the second shot and he told us not to move. He told us he was shot and said he would be all right. He began crawling into the classroom. The hallway became quiet and the kid wearing black leather coat black pants and striped shirt quickly walked toward our door and when he began to enter, Mr. Sawchuk grabbed the kid and pulled him back into the hall. I did not see him with a gun. I do not know his name. Before Christmas break I got into an argument with this kid. I was arguing with my friends in the hallway and I got mad and ran off pushing people out of the way. This kid was one of the people in the hall that I pushed. It was nothing personal when I pushed him because I did not know him. Nothing ever happened since then with him, but that is how I recognized him when most of the kids in my class today did not know who he was. He never said anything to me the day I pushed him, so I don't think this has anything to do with me. I have avoided him since that day, even taking the long way to classes when I saw him.

**Jeffrey Kinary**  
*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Today, Monday, February 9, 2004, I came to school as usual and went to my classes first through fourth period, which ends at 10:30 and I was going to go to lunch. I stayed and talked to Mr. Kolakoski (Social Studies) for a few minutes and I left his class as the fifth period bell rang (10:35). I left the classroom with my friend Casey Steponik and we headed across the school to dump my books in my locker. At my locker Casey and I bumped into our friend Eric Farrell and after I dropped my books in my locker Eric said let's go to the bathroom; I followed him into the bathroom and he immediately turned around and said "Fuck this" or something like that and Casey and I stepped out of the bathroom. As we stepped out Eric had said "Fuck this" so loudly that a teacher, who I don't know, said something like "Watch your mouth," and Eric walked directly into that teacher's classroom. At the same moment, John, whose last name I think is something like Romano, came out of the bathroom and I immediately saw that he had a shotgun (by how it looked) and I made brief eye contact with him and he pointed the gun at me and pulled the trigger. I saw a flash of fire come from the barrel of the gun and I dropped to the ground. My ears began ringing immediately and I heard what I think was the next round being chambered. I immediately began half-running and half-crawling towards the stairwell and I heard a second shot at that time. Casey was in front of me and we ran through the doors and down the stairs and we were both running and yelling "A kid has a gun" and "He just shot at us" and we ran outside and made it to an island in a parking lot where we saw Mr. Leonard and we told him what happened. He told us to go back in the school and tell someone and we went to Mr. Sawchuk's office. While we were in that office Casey and I realized that there was a BB from the shotgun shell in his baseball hat's brim (it was a blue and white baseball hat.) At that time Mr. Sawchuk wasn't in his office. My best guess is that from the

time that Eric said "Fuck this" to the time that we saw Mr. Leonard outside was probably about 30 seconds. I also guess that this all happened around 10:40 to 10:43, because I left Mr. Kolakoski's classroom at 10:35 and it takes a minute to get to my locker and I talked with Eric at my locker for about five minutes.

I remember the look in his eyes it seemed like they were jet black and he had a straight face and didn't say anything and was looking right at me. He had the shotgun leveled at me at waist level and the butt of the rifle was under his coat so it couldn't be seen.

**Kate Maranville-Hiser**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 1:20 p.m.

Today, on Feb. 9, 2004, class had just started in fifth period, which is Miss Owens' Global Studies class. We all heard a loud bang and then it sounded like things falling and then there was a moment where we were all just like, whoa, what was that? A few seconds after that there was another loud bang and some stuff came into our classroom like little blue bits of stuff and metal pieces. At that point Mrs. Owens said everyone hide and since the front of the room is furthest from the door we went up there. By the time that we were sitting up front we heard a third shot. At that time I heard some people yelling in the hall and then a teacher came into the room, it seemed like he flew into the classroom and he was laying on the floor. Mrs. Owens asked him if he was okay and I think he said that he had been hit. Then shortly thereafter a kid stepped about three feet into our classroom and he had the gun resting up on his shoulder. Then Mr. Sawchuck came up behind him and pulled him out of the classroom and I didn't see him again. I don't know for sure but there may have been a fourth shot, and if there was it was either before or after the teacher fell into the classroom, but not after Mr. Sawchuck grabbed the student. A few minutes after that we got the teacher in a chair and the nurse came up and about a half hour to 45 minutes later we were escorted down to the gym.

**Jesse R. Pavlick**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 1:27 p.m.

I am talking with Inv. Zell who told me he works for the State Police. Today I was in Rm. 317 of Columbia High School 5<sup>th</sup> Period Social Studies with Ms. Owens. At about 10:40 pm I heard a loud bang and saw dust come off the popcorn ceiling. At first I thought the noise was caused by construction equipment - dropping something large. At the same time I felt something hit the right side of my neck. I am not injured. About 3 or 4 seconds later, I heard another bang. I'm not sure if there were 2 - they were real close. I saw the person's feet outside the door and the bottom of the gun. I saw Mr. Bennett run and I think he got shot on the way into the room with a third shot. Mr. Bennett was bleeding from the right leg and he was lying in our classroom. I know that Mr. Sawchuck secured the kid with the gun. Ms. Owens helped Mr. Bennett and a lot of other teachers came up to help. All of this is true to the best of my knowledge.



**Jon Romano**  
*(Voluntary Statement)*

Date: 2/09/04

Time: 12:04 p.m.

Place: East Greenbush Police Department Booking Room

Today I woke up about 8ish, it started out as a normal day. I ate breakfast, got dressed and I wrote out a long note. It's about saying I'm sorry to some people. It's about 4 pages long. I left it on my bed at my house. I then loaded up a shot gun. My mom bought it for me about 2 days ago from the Pistol Parlor in East Greenbush. I asked her to buy it for me so I could target shoot and hunt next season. I then went outside to clear the snow off my mom's truck. She was not home. She goes to work around 8. I then drove to Columbia High School with the intention of going in the school with my shot gun. I have had fantasies for about the last year of going in Columbia and shooting up the place. The fantasies were of me shooting random people. I really hate Mr. Crannel and Mr. Koosdale. They are principals at Columbia. They had no respect for me and lied to me. If I saw them I would have shot them. I parked my mom's truck, it's a white Ford F-150, in the faculty lot near the football field. I walked to the main entrance and went in. I didn't see anyone. It was about - actually I'm not sure of the time I wasn't paying attention. I had my shot gun. It was in a hard black case. It was loaded with 5 Winchester Super X heavy game loads. I also put the rest of the bullets that came in the box in my pocket. I also had my book bag with me to blend in. I started for the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. I saw a teacher in a classroom. He didn't see me. His name is Mr. T. I think it's Talowsky. I liked him as a teacher. So I decided to not go for him, but to go in the bathroom and think about what I was about to do. I was in there about 15 minutes in the stall. Classes were then changing, and people came in the bathroom. As they were in there I then knew I couldn't do it. I stayed in there a little bit more, but I was at the point of no return. I then sent out a text message from my cell phone to Brad Whisher, Jen Hudder and Mike Russell. It said, "I'm in school with shot gun. Get out." They are my friends and had no idea what I was about to do. I just felt I had to warn them. I then sat there for another couple minutes. I left the

stall and washed my hands. I was sweating. At this point the gun is out of the case. I left the case and the bag in the stall. I came out of the bathroom. There was a kid walking towards me. He was white. I'm not sure of his name. This kid said, "This can't be real," and he ran down the hall. There were 2 other kids at the end of the hall. They saw me. I had the gun at waist level, pointing it down at them. They ran. I then said, "Oh shit," and that's when I fired 2 quick shots at them.

[12:47 p.m. - Received phone call from George Lamarche who Id'd himself as a lawyer who is now representing Jon Romano. The above written by E.A. Tubbs as told by Jon Romano, and George Lamarche stated that the questioning must stop until he arrives. He is from E. Stewart Jones.]

## **Michael James Russell**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 1:30 PM

On Saturday, February 7<sup>th</sup> at approximately 10:30 pm I went to Bennigan's to meet Brad Whisher, Kayla Welt, Kaitlyn Gould, and John Romano. During the evening John Romano mentioned he had got a new shotgun and I have it for target and skeet shooting. He pointed to his waist area where he had about 3-4 keys and said I have the key to the shotgun right here. The rest of the night John was talking about having a Valentine's get-together on Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup>. Then sometime around midnight Brad Whisher and I drove John Romano home in my car and then went to Brad's girlfriend Kaitlyn's house.

On Sunday night approximately 3-4 pm John IM'd me asking me what I did today. Later I IM'd John again and continued talking about what we did during the day. John stated, "Have a good time at school tomorrow," and I said, "You have at college, you're too cool to hang out with us high school people now." He responded, "LOL." We said see ya later and I didn't talk to him again on Sunday or Monday.

## **John P. Sawchuk**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/09/04

Time: 12:15 PM

I am the Assistant Principal at the Columbia High School. I have been so employed for about 5 yrs. I am speaking with Special Inv. James G. Ayling of the NYSP in my office at the high school. I am speaking with Inv. Ayling about an incident that occurred at about 10:40 am. I am speaking to him of my own free will. No one has promised me anything or threatened me to make this deposition.

At about 10:40 am, I was in classroom 339 observing Mrs. Van Oort to do an evaluation of her teaching. I heard two noises that I thought were explosions (sounded like). I went into the hall. I told the teacher to lock the door. I saw Mike Bennett in the hallway. I told him to get the kids out of the hallway and lock the doors. I walked toward the orange locker bay hall. As I turned the corner I saw Jon Romano [I didn't know it was him at the time] with his back to me. I could see the gun smoking. It was raised to chest level. I think he was looking into the door of a classroom. I think it was the third one down to the right from the intersecting hall. I ran up to him from behind and grabbed him in a bear hug trying to get control of the gun. We were struggling and I called to Mike Bennett to help. He was right behind me. Jon Romano kept trying to lift the gun up and I was trying to push it down. During the struggle the gun went off. Mike was about 5 yards from me, I think in front of Sue Owens classroom. Mike dove or flew into Sue Owens classroom. I didn't see him or know if he was shot. I thought he was taking cover and I kept calling for him to help. I heard him say, "I'm hit." I continued to struggle with Romano in the hallway. I started talking with Jon and told him to give it up. He said, "OK, OK, I'll give it up." He started to release the gun. I had a grip on the gun with my right hand and had a grip on the back of his shirt. He stopped struggling and at that point I saw Bill Telasky in the hallway. I told Bill that we need to get him into the Social Studies office. Tom Bacher, the Social Studies teacher, opened the

door. I gave Tom the gun and put Jon face down on the ground and got on top of him with my knee on his back. I had him put his hands behind his head. A bunch of people came into the room. I think Pete Zilgme and Hank Kolakoski. At that point I was telling them to get the police here right away and get an ambulance. It seemed like forever, but an East Greenbush police officer came in and took over.

Inv. Ayling has asked me about how far away Jon Romano was when I first saw him and realized he had a gun. I think he was about 7 yards away.

I would like to add that while I was holding Jon down in the Social Studies room, Bill was asking him questions. I heard Bill ask him why he did this and he said something about Mr. Kuzdzal and Mr. Crannell hassling him. They are the Principal and Assistant Principal. That's really about all I remember at this time.

The above statement is the truth to the best of my knowledge.

**Kristopher C. "Casey" Steponik**  
*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04  
Time: 12:19 p.m.

I am speaking with Jim Zell who told me he works for the State Police. At about 10:40 am today, me and Jeff Canary [Kinary] were on lunch break and walking down the hallway 3<sup>rd</sup> floor toward the bathroom. We met up with Eric Farrell who was on a pass to go from class to the bathroom. We all turned the corner to the right to go into the bathroom. Eric was first and saw Jon Romano coming out of the bathroom. Eric backed out of the door and said "Screw this" and he cut right and ran into an open classroom. Jeff and I backed up and started moving back down the hall. I saw Jon Romano with a shotgun pointed down toward the ground. He rounded the corner and raised the gun up and fired one round toward the right side of the hallway - toward Jeff. Jeff fell forward when Romano fired that round. I heard Romano rack the gun and I'm running toward the stairs on the left side. I heard another shot and felt the wadding bounce off my leg. Both of us ran out and told other kids about the gun. I saw three teachers and told them what happened. I feel that Jon Romano was trying to kill me and Jeff in the hallway. I feared for my life. I have had no problems with Romano in the past and I have known him since the first or second grade. Last year, I heard him say that he hates this school and wanted to blow it up, but I just thought he was a kid talking and didn't really mean anything by it. All of this is true to the best of my knowledge. I understand it is a crime to make a false written statement.

## **William Telasky**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 11:38 a.m.

I am employed by East Greenbush schools as a substitute teacher. Today, I was in the Social Studies Office on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor in the south part of Columbia High School. It was about 10 minutes into the fifth period around 10:45 am. I heard two loud reports and thought it was M-80 firecrackers going off in the hall. I got up and went towards the door. I heard the kids yell "Oh shit." When I got to the hall, it was empty and I followed the sound of the kids running down the stairs. I didn't see the kids and returned up the stairs. I heard a third report as I reached the top of the stairs and could see the Asst. Principal John Sawchuck behind a student, Jon Romano, holding him - pulling a shotgun tight into him across his chest. This was in the area of Room 317. John Sawchuck kept telling Romano to drop the gun. Another teacher Tom Bacher assisted John. Tom was able to get the gun away from Romano. We all went into the Social Studies Office and Sawchuck put Romano onto the floor. I talked to Romano and he indicated that he was frustrated with teachers at the school. An officer from the East Greenbush Police Department came in and I stopped talking with Romano. All of this is true to the best of my knowledge.

**Bradley Whisher, Jr.**

*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 12:30 p.m.

On Saturday, February 7, 2004, at approximately 10:30 pm John Romano and his mother picked me and Kaitlyn Gould she drove us and dropped the three of us, me, Kaitlyn and John off there. John acted fine and didn't mention trying to do anything at the school, nor hunting anyone at the school. We sat together with Mike Russel, Kayla Urtl, Katie Gould, John Romano and Kayla's friend Christine. At the end of the night Mike Russel and I drove John Romano home around midnight then Mike and I went to Kaitlyn's house.

Sometime either Friday February 6<sup>th</sup> or early Saturday morning February 7<sup>th</sup> I was on-line when John Romano IM'd me. John wrote about going to get a gun, a 12 gauge shotgun with his mom. He said he'd be able to get it because his mom didn't need a permit. John put up an away message saying "going with my mom to get a gun."

Today, Monday February 9<sup>th</sup> while in 5<sup>th</sup> period math class on the third floor in room 327 I heard loud noises which sounded like a sledgehammer hitting the wall. The teacher Mrs. Schultz was saying they're working on the bathroom when I felt a vibration of my cell phone going off. When she stopped talking I looked at it and saw that my text message said "I'm in school w/gun. Get out. Fr: 469-1227 CB: 518-469-1227 02/09 10:30 am." While I was reading this, a school announcement began stating, "the school was in lockdown." The second announcement came over the intercom stating the teachers should barricade the doors and the students should be on the floor. Then I showed Mrs. Schultz the message and Mr. Zilgme and other teachers were knocking on the door and she told him. An officer placed me in the math office and I waited there until Officer Rudzinski brought me to East Greenbush Police Dept.

John has never stated his wishes to do any harm at the school with the guns he talks about. It has always been for hunting or target practice purposes.



**Amy Wolff**  
*(Witness Statement)*

Date: 2/9/04  
Time: 12:45 PM

I know John Romano. We have been close friends for a while! John has recently been obsessed with guns, I would say. He has been talking on and off about it for about a year.

Last night I was chatting with John on my computer and he sent me a photo of him holding a gun. I don't know guns but it kind of looked like a long gun. He then asked me if I was going to go to school today and I told him that I was going. Previously I asked him why he wanted a gun and he told me that it made him feel powerful. When I asked him how he would get a gun he told me his mom would get one for him.

I also know that John has been depressed and was taking medication for it. I think there was a time that he was overdosing on the medication he was prescribed.

I also know that John had recently broken up with Kelly Donovan but he wasn't upset about that. I know he was very upset about his breaking up with another former girlfriend Christina Izzo.

**Peter Zilgme**  
(*Witness Statement*)

Date: 2/9/04

Time: 12:40 p.m.

I am at Columbia High School with Investigator Gloria Cappola. Everything that I am about to tell her is the truth to the best of my knowledge.

I am employed as a Social Studies teacher at Columbia High School where I have been so employed for 16 and 1/2 years. On Monday morning, 5<sup>th</sup> Period was just beginning at around 10:30 am. I have no scheduled class for that period, so I was finishing up some paperwork, and then I was going to eat lunch. I was in my assigned classroom, which is Room 321. The men's bathroom is close by. If you take a left out of my classroom, and then a quick right, you'd be at the bathroom. Everything that occurred was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. As the 5<sup>th</sup> Period class started, the halls had pretty much emptied. I could hear two or three students out near the bathroom, and I heard some profanity. I yelled out, "Watch your mouth!" A student walked into my classroom. Later, he was identified as Eric Farrell. I think I asked him what he was doing here. Suddenly, I heard a loud bang. At first I thought it was some kind of fireworks, like an M-80. Eric said, "He's got a gun." Then I heard a 2<sup>nd</sup> shot. Right after that I saw a subject whom I assumed was a student walk by my classroom with a gun. He had both hands on a pump shotgun, holding it hip high. I was familiar with the type of gun because I hunt. The subject had dark clothes on. He had brown hair and was wearing glasses. He looked at me and I looked at him. Eric Farrell was standing behind me. I started to secure my classroom. I didn't have a key, so I couldn't lock it. I put a table and bookcase in front of the door. A minute or two later, I heard a third shot. I knew that I had to get out and call "911." I opened the door and walked about two doors down, and observed the subject on the ground with John Sawchuck on top of him. Sawchuck is the Assistant Principal at our school. A Social Studies teacher, Tom Bacher, was holding the gun. Tom said that he had called "911" from the phone in the room. Tom didn't know how to unload the gun, so I took it from him and

removed three live rounds. I later observed two spent rounds near my classroom. I put the gun on my desk in the Social Studies Office. I put the live rounds in my desk drawer and later turned everything over to Detective DeSeve from the East Greenbush Police. After the shots were fired, I saw Bill Telasky, who is a substitute teacher. Someone said that Mike was shot. I assumed that meant Mike Bennett, who is a Special Ed. teacher. I saw him sitting on a chair outside of Room 317. The nurse Sheila Reilley was working on him. At some point, some other teachers took Eric Farrell and secured him in a safer classroom that had a lock on the door, and where other students were assembled.

Shortly after, the East Greenbush Police arrived and secured the scene.

Everything I have told Inv. Cappola is the truth to the best of my knowledge.

# **Appendix H:**

## **Notes & Letters from Jon Romano**

**Jon Romano**  
*(Letter to his Sister)*

Rachel,

It's January 24, 2004 and you're leaving home. This time, I have a feeling you'll be gone for a long time. Next thing you'll know, I'll be out of here! Life goes by quick. This letter is just to say good-bye, and I can't wait to end up with something like Mom and her siblings have, with you, Jay and Matt. Me and you have been hanging out lately, but I can't wait for the future. Just think about ten years from now. What will you do? Where will you live? Will you have kids? Be married? These questions apply for me, Jay and Matt too. Will you be Aunt Dex? LOL. What about thirty years from now? Will we all have kids? Will they get along? Who knows we'll find out soon enough.

Love,  
Jon

## Jon Romano

*(Note he wrote and left at home on the morning of Feb. 9, 2004)*

I'm just too afraid of the future. I could do all I've planned, but then what if some bum gets a gun and shoots me? What if there's a huge war? What if terrorists strike and I lose family? What if some fuck up kidnaps me, rapes me, tortures me, then kills me? Too much I'm afraid of. I've had issues the majority of my life. I still do, obviously. But I hoped I would get better and become a state trooper. I don't ask for help, because what if I get better, then can't be a cop? That's all I want to do. But now I'm just too afraid. I believe whatever I believe will happen in the after-life, will happen. When I die I'm going to heaven. I'm NOT A MONSTER. I've been happy for a while, but it wasn't true happiness, I just made it seem that way. Who should you blame? SOCIETY.

My mom wanted to believe I was better, and I made it seem that way.

Dr. Mooney couldn't even see this coming. Christina just thought maybe suicide. Oh YEA, blame Four Winds. Those bastards were horrible. I faked my happiness to get out. My dad treated my family like shit, back in the day. Now he's better, but the past hurts. He also told me I had no way of being a fireman when I was about ten or eleven.

### FAMILY

Mom - I love you. You treated me like a King. Thank you for everything. It's not your fault.

Dad - You use to hit me, and you beat Matt a lot. Wouldn't be surprised about you hitting Jay. Have a good few years.

Jay - You were my father figure. Why do you think I played the bass? To be like you! I love you. Sometimes I acted like you were a bad bro, that was just in my head. You were a great brother. Thank you.

Matt - We never really talked till I started Asheron's Call. Ever since then, it's been great. You too were a role-model to me. I love you. Thanks.

Rachel - You lived with me the longest of the siblings. You were a GREAT sister! Tell Kayla and Tasha I said Good-Bye! They're great people. I LOVE YOU!

Lee - My cousin, we probably would've had a future together. We could've been like Kwinn and Kerri. Have fun with life, stay out of trouble.

Aunt Donna + Uncle Hooch - You two were great to me. Aunt Donna giving me rides, and Uncle Hooch being my good friend. Remember when you invited everyone to Vermont? That was great. Playing Risk, I partnered with Hooch because he's the God Father! Good times. Thanks. LOVE

Jesse - We never really talked, but you offered help for me at HVCC. It was great talking with you at the wedding.

Kwinn + Elizabeth - Wow, you two are great people! Kwinn gave me my first swiss army knife. That had no bad effect though, don't worry! Sorry for the incident at Hatch Lake. If you two ever need financial help, go to my mom. It's one of my last wishes that she helps you two. Love you!

Uncle Scott + Aunt Lyn - Thanks for always having X-mas parties and Thanksgiving parties. Fun times.

Kristi - Lil cous, I don't know how much you'll remember of me, but I just want you to know I'm not an evil person. I don't want you to look back and think that I was. In a few years, I hope you'll start to understand.

To all other family - I'm sorry.

## FRIENDS

Christina - Wow, you were a huge part of my life. You're my babygirl, and I love you with all my heart. So sorry. Too many memories to say

Kelli - IDK what to say. Thanks for the good times

"GPF" - some of you were good friends. some weren't

Good-Bye, and good luck in life.

Brad - You had issues, so do I. That's why we fought. But now, we're friends again. Thanks for the good times. I love you like a brother.

Mike - You're lucky, don't fuck things up.

Barry - You have issues. get some help

Amy - You were one of the people that made me think, thanks. Love you

Jessica - We haven't talked lately, but thanks for the friendship

Jenny - You were the first girl I cared about. Too bad we never hooked up. But I remember you kissed me on the cheek after a dance once. Hehe.

People I Hate

Mrs. Greer - Brad can explain. Bitch

Mr. Cranell - Liar FUCK YOU

Jeff McCabe - Talk shit behind my back. Fuck you, I hope you rot in Hell.

There's other friends and people I hate,  
but it's time to watch "Bowling for Columbine"

I'M SORRY

I WISH IT Was DIFFERENT

wait look on next page



I've been watching Bowling for Columbine.

How am I different than what the media says school shooters are?

TV I watch: Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, Family Guy, SNL, Mad TV, Simpsons, Law and Order, Monk, and others. oh, South Park! Man Show (Jimmy + Ad

Music: Country music! Toby Keith!

Movies: ok, movie I watch have some violence. Goose Pointe Blank, South Park, The Frighteners, Cruel Intentions, Animal House, Blown Away, 10 Things I Hate About You (yes a chick flick) and others, just ask my friends.

I like to laugh! Comedies are good!

I'm not what the media says I should be.

But why Columbia (other than I hate it for obvious reasons)? About eleven months ago, I was in Four Winds. I told a couple people (Barry, Brad) because they wouldn't care. But I guess everyone knew. And one day, Four Winds received a fax about people from Columbia saying that I said "I am going to kill myself and no one can stop me." I figure that's why I was there longer than I should have. So Columbia, IT'S YOUR FAULT.

## **Jon Romano**

*(Letter to the Albany Times Union from Prison)*

To the Editor,

My name is Jon Romano and on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004, I was the Columbia High School shooter. I would appreciate if you printed my following message about school shootings. Also be sure to print all of it, and not changed around.

To the readers,

My name is Jon Romano, and at seventeen years old I'm at Clinton Correctional Facility. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004, I was the shooter at Columbia High School. It was the worst mistake I ever made, and now I want to make sure others don't make the same mistake. For the readers that are still students, life can feel hard, I know. You might have plenty of problems and be having a horrible time. But I want you to remember, when it comes to suicide or homicide, it's a permanent answer to a temporary problem. There's other ways of doing things. Talking to someone, a therapist, priest or another religious figure (even if you're not religious they'll help). If medication ends up being best for you, find the right one for you, and stay on it even when you feel better.

Also remember things don't always go the way you plan. I just wanted to commit suicide and ended up with a twenty year prison sentence. I never expected to end up in prison, I didn't plan leaving that school alive. So never risk doing something that might have you end up in prison because things might happen differently than you expect.

I learned a lot of things once my freedom was taken away. The most important thing is how precious life is. I learned how to appreciate everything, enjoy the simple pleasures in life, and how to make the best of things. I was sixteen years, three months and ten days old when I got arrested. The smallest amount of time I have to do in prison is seventeen years, one month and four days. But you know what, I'm making the best of it.

It was said that I “studied” Columbine and was trying to repeat it. That’s just ridiculous. Plenty of things were said by the D.A. that were ridiculous, like that I wasn’t sorry. I’ve prayed for all those who were affected on that day. I’ve apologized to many, and been forgiven by many more. I now pray for those killed, wounded, and for the family of all those affected in the latest shooting in Minnesota.

Please nobody follow in mine or other’s footsteps by bringing a weapon to school. Please don’t even try to take your own life. Life is too precious whether you notice or not. Always remember if you hurt yourself or others, you’ll also be hurting your family and loved ones or theirs.

Jon Romano