

Hope and Healing: Recovery From School Violence

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Thursday, May 21, 1998 began like any other at Thurston High School, with students chatting noisily in the cafeteria, eating breakfast and trading the tales of youth. On that morning we were innocent, unsuspecting individuals only marginally affected by youth violence. That innocence was brutally shattered when a 15-year old freshman dressed in a long trench coat, taped a hunting knife to his leg, and filled his backpack with ammunition. He entered the high school at 7:55 AM with three concealed guns: a .22 caliber Ruger semi-automatic rifle, a 9mm Glock pistol and a .22 caliber Ruger semi-automatic pistol. He quickly shot two students in a hallway, then walked calmly into the cafeteria and sprayed 50 rounds of ammunition into the crowd of 300 students. What was first thought to be a school prank turned into a nightmare when two students were killed and 25 others were wounded.

What transpired was totally unlike anything we had ever experienced. As a school district Crisis Response Team leader, I received the emergency call just minutes after the shooting and my immediate reaction was one of absolute disbelief. Surely, this can't be happening here, I thought. As I approached the school I saw one ambulance after another racing by with their innocent victims. Throngs of frightened parents and neighbors began filling the sidewalks and pressed past the gathering media to reach the school. When the Principal stood before the crowd and read the names of the wounded, he saw shock, disbelief and tears on the faces before him.

Time stood still and our world was filled with sirens, ambulances, stretchers, reporters, police cars, yellow tape, flashing lights, frantic faces, sobbing voices, crowds pressing, and a list of names being read.

An eerie quiet prevailed inside the school. Teachers and students had provided immediate first aid to the wounded and most other students were in their classrooms in a lock-down (nearby schools where the shots were heard were also in lock-down). The shooting had ended when several students tackled the gunman as he paused to reload his rifle. Three hundred students who had witnessed the shooting, and survived, gathered in the library where caring adults calmed them while they waited for police questioning. Frantic parents searched for sons and daughters, some who would never come home.

The nightmare intensified as we learned that the parents of the 15-year-old shooter had been found dead in their home, each apparently shot by their son the night before. The parents, both teachers, were long time residents of Springfield and well loved in the community. When the President of the United States phoned that morning, we realized that this tragedy would affect not only the 11,000 students and 1,200 employees of the Springfield School District, but the entire community, the state of Oregon and even the entire nation. Our sense of safety and security was shattered along with our innocence, and no longer could *we* say, "It can't happen here."

The issues that made this particular crisis difficult were caused by the homicides that destroyed the safety and security of our school, and the pervasive, community-wide impact of the trauma. The issues are complex in supporting homicide survivors. Dr. Debra Alexander, trauma consultant, summarized the issues well in her book, *Children Changed by Trauma*, “Grieving the loss of someone who has been killed suddenly, violently, and senselessly is different from any other form of grieving. The anguish is intense and long lasting. The physical and emotional reactions to the trauma are only the beginning. Criminal justice systems, insurance companies, settlements, and media can present a multitude of frustrations and often repeatedly cause a return to initial trauma reactions” (Alexander, 1999, p. 186).ⁱ

CRISIS RECOVERY – THE KEY CONCEPTS

In an ideal world we would never need a crisis plan to respond to a school shooting. In the real world, however, we do. There are actions a school district can take to minimize the trauma if violence does occur. It is our hope this information will assist other schools to plan for and cope with a crisis should it occur. The most important factors that aided our recovery were the community relationships we had established and the planning we had done prior to the event.

Nothing in our previous experiences with individual student and teacher deaths truly prepared us for the magnitude of this horrifying event. However, within an hour of the shooting, my colleagues and I quickly organized a “core team” of school psychologists, administrators, and mental health workers and together we designed the school district response. That response was an on-the-spot modification of procedures we’d used in dozens of “smaller” crisis interventions over the previous seven years. As in other districts where there have been shootings, the school psychologists played a major role in this response.

Since 1994, each school in Springfield has had a crisis team and a plan, which specifies the duties of the team members and procedures to follow in emergencies, and is reviewed each school year. School administrators and city officials had collaborated in drafting the district’s Emergency Procedures Manual. In addition, district counselors and psychologists are trained and experienced in crisis response and serve as a district-level team when needed. Within the first hour of the shooting, counselors and mental health workers from our community, other Lane County school districts and our county mental health agency responded to Thurston High School. This county network allowed us immediate access to counselors from many school districts as well as from our local mental health resources.

FOUR CHALLENGES

In Caplan’s (1964) model of crisis intervention, the secondary level includes the steps taken immediately “to minimize the effects of the crisis and to keep it from escalating.”ⁱⁱ Our crisis response unfolded with this goal in mind and we faced four critical challenges in the early stages of the response. We believe the ways in which

these challenges were met had a direct impact on mitigating the long-term effects of the crisis.

(a) Coordination between the school district and City of Springfield was monumental.

It quickly became clear that this was a multi-jurisdictional response that required many decisions. The challenge for the heads of many agencies was to work together in ways they had never before done.

In order to avoid conflicting messages, school administrators and city officials quickly formed a joint “command center” at City Hall. This became a clearinghouse for inquiries from both the press and the public. Additional phone lines set up by 10:00 AM the day of the tragedy were staffed 24 hours a day through the four-day holiday weekend by city and school district employees to provide information to the community.

To ensure coordination, the CEO’s from the district, city, and the four law enforcement agencies worked together in a modified Incident Command structure. Staff members spent hundreds of hours together developing and revising plans for the schools and the community in the weeks following the shooting.

(b) Handling the intense and intrusive media was a formidable task.

Responding to the crush of local and national media was a challenge we had not faced prior to this event. Throughout the first day and night the media vans and satellite trucks rolled in from across the nation. Before the first hour had passed, a CNN helicopter hovered overhead, transmitting images of our newfound horrific “fame.” Reporters from as far away as Japan, Portugal, England and Australia quickly took on a larger-than-life presence in our normally quiet community. ABC, NBC, CBS, NPR, *Inside Edition*, *Hard Copy*, *USA Today*, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Psychology Today* all made their appearances. We were amazed to observe that some reporters tried posing as doctors and counselors in their efforts to access hospitals and schools.

Communication with the media was handled through regular press conferences so the hundreds of reporters covering the event could get information from one source. Press conferences were scheduled on a regular basis and always included representatives from the school district, law enforcement and the hospitals. ID badges were essential for all volunteers. Local and national television crews filmed live reports in front of the school, but no media personnel were allowed on the high school campus until after school resumed, and then only briefly, late at night. This was done to minimize the filming of traumatic images and to allow the students' first view of campus to be in person, not on television. Six days following the shooting, the fleet of white vans crept silently away almost as abruptly as they had arrived, leaving the school to stand free of lights, cameras, and sound bites.

(c) Communication was especially difficult during the first few hours and days.

We quickly were challenged with the jamming of the district phone system, which prevented communication with the high school, and with many of the other schools in the district. In addition, at times it was difficult to determine when information was credible.

We used cell phones, pagers and radios for sending and receiving information. A church across the street was opened and parents were directed there to receive information about injured students. During the first day we met with all the Thurston High School staff, all the district administrators from our 23 schools and the central office, and with approximately 100 counselors from the community. In hindsight, we could have used the district email system and website to relay information to other schools and the public.

(d) The students' delayed return to school required extensive planning with counseling support.

The high school was closed for 4 1/2 days following the shooting: first while police gathered evidence, then for the Memorial holiday weekend. Our challenge was to provide mental health support to students, staff and parents during this period, and to support them in returning to the campus.

The Red Cross provided meals and 80 trained therapists met with students, teachers, parents, and administrators during the day following the tragedy when we gathered at a nearby middle school. An important step of the recovery occurred when students, their families, and staff visited the repaired Thurston campus during an Open House we planned for Memorial Day. This allowed everyone to enter the campus supported by family, friends, counselors, and even "comfort dogs." Although many of the 2,000 visitors sat or stood in the repaired cafeteria, not all were able to do so. There were many tears that day and one student commented, "It was unlike anything I've ever felt before. I've been around death before in my life but nothing like this . . . nothing that's really just gotten down to the very core of me and made me want to break down and cry right there."ⁱⁱⁱ

The next step of the students' reentry occurred the first day of classes following the shooting. After a free breakfast in the school courtyard and cafeteria, students attended a half-day of classes, and then hundreds attended the funeral of one victim that afternoon. Volunteer counselors were present in every classroom that day and remained available in support rooms at the high school through the end of the school year.

The focus of those first few days and weeks was to assist people in coping with the trauma. Our district psychologists counseled students and staff through the weekend, and managed the monumental task of screening, scheduling and monitoring over 200 outside counselors. NOVA/NEAT volunteers, who had arrived the afternoon of the shooting, held community debriefings, news conferences, and training sessions throughout the next nine days. We greatly appreciated all of this support, as the impact of the trauma was pervasive throughout our community.

THE LONG ROAD TO HEALING

The long-term recovery from this trauma required support in a variety of different ways. Support came from many sources including private counseling agencies, Lane County Mental Health, Lane Education Service District, other school districts, the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), the National Association of School Psychologists National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT), and the Red Cross. Following are a few of the important factors that were part of the long-term recovery process.

Memorials and healing events were essential to help the community move forward.

The most impromptu of the memorials became one of the most powerful for a community looking for solace in this tragedy. Within hours of the shooting, community members of all ages placed flowers, posters, balloons, plants, teddy bears, candles, photos, poems, crosses and other mementos on the chain link fence in front of Thurston High. Ultimately, this memorial stretched the entire length of the campus, some 150 yards, and represented the community's outpouring of grief in a sea of flowers. For several days, vehicle and pedestrian traffic was non-stop as thousands passed to pay their respects. In addition, a candlelight vigil was held outside City Hall, a memorial service for Bill and Faith Kinkel was held at Springfield High School, prayer services were held in many churches, and the firefighters' Blue Ribbon of Promise campaign to end school violence began.^{iv}

The design and construction of a permanent memorial proved to be one of the biggest challenges of our recovery. An initial committee of students, staff, and parents designed a permanent school memorial, then the process stalled due to lack of funds and lack of agreement about the details of the design. Several years later a new group was formed and the memorial was dedicated May 21, 2003, on the fifth anniversary of the shooting. The memorial consists of a small park near the high school containing trees, benches, a representation of the Thurston memorial fence, and a basalt pillar. The engraving on the pillar honors those who lost their lives, those who were injured, and those who came to their aid:

THIS MEMORIAL SHALL STAND FOREVER IN MEMORY OF

Mikael Nickolauson
and
Ben Walker

With comfort to those who miss them;
with encouragement to those who are shooting survivors
and are striving to overcome both physical and emotional wounds.

On May 21st, 1998, our community suffered a great loss.
Mikael and Benjamin were killed and 25 students were

wounded in the school breezeway and cafeteria.

Seven students helped disarm the student gunman. Were it not for those students, the THS students and staff who rendered immediate assistance and the combined efforts from Springfield Police, local area Fire Departments, EMT's and extended local Law Enforcement, more lives may have been lost.

Appreciation is extended to the community for opening their hearts and offering help in so many ways; from assistance provided by local medical facilities and personnel to donations and continued support.

The courage and strength shown by the victims and families has inspired all, and has given hope and encouragement to continue with life after tragedy.

May we all understand the life changing impact of violence, and may this place extend the comfort, strength and hope that comes from a caring community, state and nation.

Care of the caregivers was important.

The two NOVA teams held numerous debriefings that were essential for the emotional well being of the service providers. We are extremely grateful for the invaluable advice and assistance we received from the NOVA teams. They supported us with wisdom and caring during the most dreadful experience we could imagine.

The years were filled with continued support.

Long-term follow up required time, staff and additional resources. The event was not over on May 22nd, the day after the shooting, or on June 12th, the last day of school. Summer was filled with grant writing, summer activities at Thurston High, planning for freshman orientation and the first days of school, and training district staff in the dynamics of post-trauma reactions. The Thurston Assistance Center was established to provide counseling support and information to Springfield students and families affected by the shooting.

The Springfield School District Superintendent and the school board members made a commitment to enter the succeeding school year with thoughtfulness, planning and training in response to this tragedy. Dr. Marleen Wong, Director of Crisis Counseling and Intervention Services for the Los Angeles Unified School District, instructed our teachers and school staff members in post-trauma responses; and Dr. Marlene Young, Executive Director of NOVA, conducted a 3-day crisis response workshop for 50 counselors, psychologists and mental health workers.

On the first day of school the following fall, reporters and media trucks surrounded the school once again as students entered the campus filled with much

excitement and some apprehension. Teachers asked students to be tolerant and patient with one another as they experienced a broad range of reactions and reminded them that, while many students were ready to move on, some were not. Twenty of the injured students returned to Thurston High. Some still carried the physical evidence of scars and bullets within them and faced lengthy rehabilitation. Some could not yet return to the cafeteria and feared recurring violence. Bereavement was complicated by traumatic grief. The prevailing atmosphere that day, however, was reflected by the words of one senior, “Though we were inevitably affected by tragedy, we are looking forward to what life has to offer us next. We have learned how very precious, yet circumstantial, life is. Now, more than ever, our eyes are open wide, our ambitions are high, and we are ready to live.”^v

Our approach to follow-up was two fold: to recapture the school’s normal activities, and at the same time, to support the students and staff in achieving a healthy recovery. The cafeteria was painted and brightened in order to minimize the traumatic reminders. Uniformed security officers were added to both high schools. Additional counselors added to the Thurston High School staff continued until June 2001, when the freshmen who were present at the time of the shooting graduated.

The days leading up to the one-year anniversary were filled with anticipation, anxiety, rumors of copycat violence, and daily doses of media attention (all intensified by the Columbine shooting one month prior to our 1st anniversary). The day began with bomb-sniffing dogs searching the campus and dozens of parents patrolling the area, and continued with counselors and police officers supporting and reassuring those who attended classes. The day ended as over a thousand people gathered to remember the families of the victims in a “Community Gathering for Remembrance and Renewal” at Thurston High School.

Enduring the legal process was difficult.

Although our community had previously endured high profile murder trials, we had never experienced anything that attracted the attention of the world, as did this case. In preparation for the trial we sought the advice of experts and held planning meetings involving the staff of the school district, City of Springfield, and District Attorney’s office; victim’s assistance workers; public information directors and trauma counselors.

Debra Alexander has described the unique dynamics of homicide and the legal system. She said, “Homicide creates a different kind of grief because of the rage it evokes. Often the criminal justice system slows down the grieving process when closure around a case is not made or appears to be made unjustly. Children may need your help as they struggle to understand the act of murder and the intentional taking of a human life. They will need your continued support and understanding as the legal case unfolds” (Alexander, 1999, p. 95).^{vi}

In September 1999, eighteen months after the shooting, we were ready to face the suspect’s trial. Then suddenly, just four days before jury selection was to begin, he pleaded guilty to the charges, avoiding a lengthy trial. During a seven-day sentencing hearing both defense and prosecution presented witness testimony to the judge. Many of

the victims spoke of the impact of this tragedy in emotional, heart-wrenching testimony reflecting anger, hate, sadness and sorrow. On November 10, 1999 the judge sentenced Kip Kinkel to 112 years in prison, with no parole, and our community breathed a sigh of relief.

OUR “NEW NORMAL”

As a result of this tragedy our community has come together as never before. The nightmare has ended, but this large-scale tragedy continues to demand our attention and our strength. The further we move from the event, the broader the range of responses becomes. We can't go back to the way we were; we are no longer innocent, unsuspecting individuals marginally affected by youth violence. We will never be “normal” again, in the way we were prior to this event. Our task is to integrate this trauma into our lives and find a “new normal” for each of us. The mental health recovery of the 1,500 students and staff of Thurston High is an on-going process and we are often reminded of the permanent impact of this tragedy on our community members. Dr. Marleen Wong advised us, “Springfield will never be just any school district. It will be recognized and acknowledged, questioned and criticized, studied and consulted. Work hard to find that balance between mourning the past, treasuring the present, and keeping hope for the future” (Wong, 1998).^{vii} That continues to be our mission.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cathy is a School Psychologist, Special Programs Administrator, and Crisis Response Team leader for the Springfield School District in Springfield, Oregon. She helped direct the school district's response and recovery efforts following a fatal shooting in 1998. Cathy has responded to over 40 crises in a variety of school districts and she has served as a consultant to other communities that have experienced school violence including Littleton, Colorado, San Diego, California and Cold Spring, Minnesota.

She has published numerous articles related to school safety and crisis response and is a contributing author to the book “Interventions for Academic and Behavior Problems” (2002). Cathy has served on the advisory boards for the Oregon Center for School Safety and the National Resource Center for Safe Schools. She is the current chair for the Crisis in the Schools Interest Group for the National Association of School Psychologists.

Cathy was an invited panelist for the White House School Safety Conference in Washington, DC on October 10, 2006 attended by President and First Lady Laura Bush. Cathy was one of six panelists who spoke on "Helping Communities Heal and Recover."

ⁱ Alexander, D. A. 1999. *Children Changed by Trauma*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

ⁱⁱ Caplan, G. 1964. *Principals of Preventive Psychiatry*. New York: Basic Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anonymous student interview, May 25, 1998 at Thurston High School.

^{iv} Ribbon of Promise National Campaign to End School Violence
<http://www.rwjf.org/portfolios/resources/grantsreport.jsp?filename=035695.htm&iid=141>

^v Anonymous student interview, September 1998 at Thurston High School.

^{vi} Alexander, D. A. 1999. *Children Changed by Trauma*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

^{vii} Wong, M. September 1998. Address to Springfield Public Schools staff. Springfield, Oregon.