

The Final Word

with
Mark Toriski



The Kids Aren't Alright

The breaking headline on CNN the morning of February 27 was a familiar one, albeit one that was strangely (or perhaps morbidly) nostalgic – “Shots reportedly fired at Chardon, Ohio high school.” The scene that morning was also familiar. A mass of students standing in a parking lot, police cars and ambulances everywhere, parents and teachers trying to comfort them while barely keeping it together themselves, all huddled together, unknowingly forming a vigil for the unspeakable tragedy that had just unfolded before them. Their innocence forever shattered.

The wound is still raw with Chardon – even as I write this, news is just coming in that a third victim in the shooting has died – and yet it feels like that same Band-Aid that has been on for the past 20 years is getting ripped off again.

I was a teenager throughout most of the '90s and one thing that remains vivid today is the images like the one in Chardon that would play on a rather routine basis each night on the news. In fact, it had become such an all-too-common occurrence that it actually left me and many of my peers too numb to respond with any sort of emotional resonance. I'm not saying there wasn't any empathy rather it's like rewatching a horror movie for the 15th time. Revisiting it over and over again takes away some of the shock that made it so terrifying. Sadly, that's what happened with this real-life horror story as the U.S. map became littered with pinpoints of locations that are no longer rural communities, but locations of senseless tragedy.

I feel sympathy and remorse for the people of Chardon, not just for what has befallen them, but because their small community is now thrust into the very public media spotlight and they will forever be a trivial point in a long list of other unfortunate towns who went through the same horror story, something our region shares. I grew up 35 minutes from Edinboro, but was the same age as the students of James W. Parker Middle School who were attending the dance at Nick's Place where Andrew Wurst opened fire, killing science teacher John Gillette. When I started college at Edinboro University, I unknowingly made friends with one of the students who were at that dance. And when I found out who she was, the topic was always broached carefully. Her demeanor would shift. She would become almost tense and uncomfortable. And she would say what she had to say before moving on. She told me her and her then-classmates preferred to let the matter be in the past – to just keep quiet on matter like a state

of perpetual mourning. This seems to remain today, even as local media tried to mark the anniversary of the shooting. They chose to stay out of it. It is their badge to wear and they chose to do so with quiet dignity.

But one who can't stay mum on the matter is the media. Coverage of Chardon has been rather comprehensive, going as far as to find a rather ominous message on Lane's Facebook page posted clear back in December 2011. The post is a poem of sorts referring to “a quaint lonely town, (where there) sits a man with a frown (who) longed for only one thing, the world to bow at his feet...He was better than the rest, all those ones he detests, within their castles, so vain.” Lane then wrote about going through “the castle...like an ominous breeze through the trees,” past guards – all leading up to the post's dramatic conclusion. “Feel death, not just mocking you. Not just stalking you but inside of you...Wriggle and writhe. Feel smaller beneath my might. Seizure in the Pestilence that is my scythe.”

The post concluded with, “Die, all of you.”

In the previous issue of the *Marketplace Gazette* I talked about how social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have become fundamental in how we access breaking news stories. Now we have to look at another use the sites have shown to be quite beneficial for – a portal into the mind of madness. If there is one thing I can say about just how far we've come since the school massacres of my youth, it is that it is refreshing to not see any advocacy groups trying to blame this on Marilyn Manson (and I understand that statement makes as much sense relevantly as blaming the Columbine massacre on KISS), violence in video games, or any other coincidental third party. Today investigators have enough common sense to examine a Facebook page before an iPod for any telling (but sadly all-too-late) signs to help answer the most important question in situations like this – why?

That being said, warning signs like these always seem to crop up as an after-thought in situations like Chardon and Columbine. T.J. Lane came from a broken home, was a social outcast, had a history of violence, and was a deeply-disturbed individual. I'm not saying every at-risk youth is a risk to their peers and school, but when the writing is on the Facebook wall for more nearly two months perhaps it is time to be more diligent, to be more cautious, and to stop ignoring the warning signs.

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