

Mass Casualty: Santa Barbara enters the ‘real world’

Michael S. Williams

“Shots fired!! Shots fired!!”

- Radio transmissions from multiple sheriffs’ deputies as they engaged a mass shooting suspect in a firefight on Del Playa, May 23rd, 2014

Again, reality strikes and it doesn’t get any more real than it did on Friday night when a lone killer moved in on known and unknown victims alike, stabbing, shooting and driving into them, leaving death and carnage throughout the community of Isla Vista. In less than 10 minutes, six were dead and at least 13 injured and the suspect was in custody, but deceased.

Additionally, a police officer suffered a heart attack and, according to Cottage Hospital staff, was saved by a sheriff deputy’s medical training.

There are many stories here of real heroism, tragedy, compassion and public safety teamwork that are for others to tell. Without a doubt, the impact of this will live forever for everyone involved, but what about the community, will we remember?

As I listened to the radio come alive with emergency communications, I could not help but flash back to the eve of the 1984 Olympics when Daniel Lee Young drove his car southbound on Westwood Boulevard killing one and injuring at least 54 others.

As a police officer, this was my first experience with a real mass casualty incident. I had been at many traffic collisions, shootings and stabbings, aircraft crashes, even ambush situations, but mass casualty is different - it stays with you forever.

Shootings, stabbings, drive-by shootings and gang violence are not new to Santa Barbara County but frequently go unreported by the media because they have generally become non-news events. However, active shooter mass casualty events remain high profile because of their nature.

Anyone surprised by this tragedy is not paying attention or is living in a delusional mindset. Santa Barbara has been home to other mass casualty events all within a mile of each other.

On February 23rd, 2001, David Attias drove his Saab on Sabado Tarde Road in Isla Vista hitting parked cars and pedestrians, killing four and injuring at least one other.

Just about a mile from Isla Vista on January 30th, 2006, Jennifer San Marco shot and killed seven people at the Goleta post office on Storke Road. This incident remains one of the deadliest workplace violence incidents in the United States.

My December 2013 News-Press column, “Active Shooter Realities” referenced the February 2013 issue of Psychiatric Times article “Mass Shootings: Research and Lessons” by Dr. James Knoll, IV. The article pointed out that overall crime is down throughout the United States. However, mass murder appears to be increasing.

While these violent events are not new, they “have taken on a different quality. This quality has been affected by cultural shift, social media, and enhanced media coverage,” according to Dr. Knoll.

Dr. Knoll reports in his article that research is limited and hampered by “methodological problems.” Nonetheless, he suggests that there are certain consistent psychosocial factors including problems with self-esteem, persecutory and paranoid outlooks, narcissism, depression, suicidal tendencies and social rejection associated with mass shooting suspects.

During a class I attended in January 2013, Clinical Professor of Emergency Health Service Department of Emergency Health Services, University of Maryland Dr. Jeffrey Mitchell mentioned the impact of media and mental health in mass school shootings. Dr. Mitchell summarized five factors common to all the shooters:

- All had well documented mental health disorders
- All had engaged in target range shooting
- All were heavily involved in electronic gaming
- All were frequently left alone
- All were utilizing prescribed psychoactive medications

More recent shootings are finding the same results. It will be some time before we learn what factors contributed to the recent Isla Vista murders but the publicly released video speaks for itself.

The study, “Violence and School Shootings,” suggests that there may be other factors which explain school shootings such as culture, the social ecology of a school or other community factors. No doubt this is true. Do you think today’s social media, television, music, enabling parents and the overzealous distribution of psychotropic medications is problematic for our children?

The articles, “Violence Exposure, Psychological Trauma,” and, “Suicide Risk in a Community Sample of Dangerously Violent Adolescents,” appeared in a 2001 issue of the Journal of American Academy of Child Adolescence Psychiatry. It suggested “there are differences between urban and suburban school shootings – some acts are related to threats to the perpetrator’s social identity.”

“Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings” suggests “Suburban and rural shootings may be characterized by social alienation, whereas urban incidents may be associated with a general inner-city tolerance of violence. The issues of social marginalization and familial

dysfunctions are other common findings.”

Studies support the finding that shooters who expressed their feelings and express threats online were frequently bullied and depressed. Their online threats presented clear intent of what they were planning. Verbal threats indicated problems with impulse control and delinquent behavior.

In the quest for answers it appears that “other factors that contribute to mass shootings, particularly cultural and social ones, it is impossible to avoid the issues of narcissism and media responsibility. Narcissism is the classic American pathology, but there is concern that it may be proliferating ‘virally’ and gaining momentum.”

The study “The Narcissism Epidemic” reports “crimes due to narcissism or a wounded ego are directly relevant to mass shootings.” Studies showing that social rejection and narcissism are factors working together to cause aggressive behaviors are well documented in the histories of mass murder shooters.

Of the disenfranchised, the depressed, or person looking for attention Knoll says, “It becomes difficult to deny that the media coverage given to mass shooting perpetrators has sent the message that committing a spectacular act of murder or killing is a great way to get attention.”

Long ago I worked at Disneyland. Part of our employee introduction was to understand the philosophy of Walt Disney. He wanted – insisted – that when guests entered the park they truly feel as if they have entered another world. It was the duty of every employee to help make that fantasy a reality.

Our world is not Disneyland but a real place and despite our best efforts to think otherwise we cannot hide from it.

As a social spectator, a parent and former cop, my observation is our kids today are profoundly privileged in ways most of us never enjoyed. However, social skills are now learned on the Internet, not in social settings. We see and experience the results of this failure every day.

For decades our schools and our social structure supported the notions that everyone is a winner. Well sorry, but this is just not true. To suggest otherwise is intellectual dishonesty and a disservice to those who are going to experience loss and disappointment many times over. The fact is, not everyone is a winner. In the real world very few people care about your self-esteem (unless they are getting paid).

More problematic is that there is virtually no accountability for anyone - public, private or individual - the rule of law (and common sense) has been abandoned to social correctness, failure to lead, fear of litigation, depletion of moral character and special interest agendas. Mass shootings are just one manifestation of social breakdown and the ends justify the means attitudes of today.

Social engineering and political correctness have not served any of us well. Perhaps we should return to what we know works, honor, respect, discipline, pride of ownership, accountability, competition, courage, compassion, hard work, dedication, commitment, moral standards, ethics and personal character.

We cannot wash the blood of the victims away. Prevention is one answer, but it requires real leadership, commitment and determination to return some form of sanity to our streets, our homes, schools, universities, businesses and governing institutions. Otherwise, the saga will continue and the deaths of so many will be in vain.