

# American College of Forensic Psychology

## 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Forensic Psychology Symposium

Hosted by The American College of Forensic Psychology,  
and  
Fielding Graduate University

April 28, 2022 – April 30, 2022

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Virginia Tech Tragedy

# Virginia Tech Tragedy

**Friday, April 29, 2022**

2:45 p.m. – 4:15 p.m. PDT,

or

5:45 p.m. – 7:15 p.m. EDT

# Disclaimer

- This presenter does not have any conflicts surrounding this presentation
- He does have a book on the Virginia Tech shooting tragedy, which is in press
- When this book is finished copies will be sent to the Dean of Fielding Graduate University, the school library, and the ACFP
- The opinions expressed are the opinions of this presenter. They are not meant to be represented as those of the ACFP, or of The Fielding Graduate University
- No permission to videotape or audiotape this talk.

IF ONE SCHOOL SHOOTING IS  
PREVENTED IN THE FUTURE,  
THIS WORK IS NOT IN VAIN

Please Note:

This Presentation will stop 15 minutes before the scheduled end of the talk, regardless of where the discussion is at that point. This will allow time for questions and answers.

If time runs out and any questions are left unanswered, please send an email with that question to the speaker at [jlbrittain2@aol.com](mailto:jlbrittain2@aol.com).

# **The Virginia Tech Tragedy**

**April 16, 2007**

**No One Connected The Dots**

# Recommended Readings

The following articles or writings are highly recommended for audience members to read before the presentation:

1. Seung Hui Cho: “Manifesto”. Mailed to NBC News, the morning of the shootings. Available on the Internet. It is not something that is easy to read.
2. August, 2007. Report of the Review Panel, Virginia Tech, Chapter IV. Mental Health History of Seung Hui Cho (sic). Please download and read pages 31-53, and pages 54-60.

Also highly recommended: Roy, Lucinda. No Right To Remain Silent.

Professor Roy was the head of the VT English Department, and met, one on one with Seung, fearing for her safety when doing so.

What was an is unique to the Virginia Tech Tragedy is this:

As part of a legal settlement with Virginia Tech, the school agreed to make an keep a public archive of documents about this tragedy. Any person desiring to do so, can go to the Public Library in Richmond, VA, or the Carpenter Library at Virginia Tech, show a photo ID, and be given a computer with tens of thousands of documents about the tragedy. Not an easy task, as there is no menu.



When it Comes to Gun Violence,  
When All is Said and Done  
More is Usually Said  
Than is Done

# Birth to Centerville

*“The Child is the Father of the Man”*

- Born in Seoul, South Korea. Family makeup at the time of his birth 4 members
- Their family had traditional Confucian values, according to Watts and Clark, 2007, *“Sons are supposed to do better than daughters”*.
- Seung’s Mother once told her employer that she wished her son had attended Princeton, not her daughter.
- Struggles with immigration
- *“Our Life is Defined by Chae Mon”*
- When it came time in America for him to go to therapy, it was as difficult a process to take as might be possible. Seeking mental health services is particularly difficult for such an immigrant family.
- *“Our life is governed by Chae Mon, what other people think about us”, an unnamed Korean immigrant said. “Consulting someone outside of the family is admitting that you can’t handle it. It is shameful, so, we keep everything to ourselves”*.

# Birth to Centerville

- Heart catheterization at age of three, would not let anyone touch him after that
- From the time he could talk, he was silent, would not speak, and would cry if visitors came to their home
- Started school in the Northern Virginia Public School System. There, he continued his stoic silence.
- Stoic silence resulted in a referral to a local, multicultural and multilingual Therapy Center
- He was seen by a Korean born therapist. He would not speak to her.
- Transferred to an Art Therapist.
- Seung would make houses of clay, without windows. She gently suggested that this might suggest some feelings of inadequacy. He cried. After a period, she became so concerned he might be suicidal that she had him sign a “suicide contract”.

# Birth to Centerville

- The treatment team met after he was evaluated by a Child Psychiatrist. He was put on Paroxetine, an antidepressant. He was given three diagnosis:
  - Selective Mutism
  - Major Depression, Single Episode
  - Severe Anxiety Disorder, Selective Mutism (DSM-IV)
- Seung remained in therapy with this multidisciplinary team until he was allowed to stop, just before he turned 18 yo.
- Fellow students would “tease him” and even offered him money just to hear him speak. He never responded.

People Who Like Laws and Sausage

Should Never See How Either is Made

# FERPA

- Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, 1974.
  - Federal law that deals with student academic records, for parents to have access to them, and to have them amended, and to have some control over the disclosure of personally identifiable information. Control goes to the student when he/she turns 18 yo.
- President Bush sent DOJ an DOE to 105 colleges and universities, across the nation after hearing Virginia Tech felt FERPA prevented them from acting on their concerns about Seung Hui-Cho.
- EVERYONE ONE OF THEM SAID WHAT VIRGINIA TECH SAID, THAT THEY FELT FERPA PREVENTED THEM FROM DISCLOSING THEIR CONCERNS ABOUT A STUDENT WHOM THEY FELT WAS DANGEROUS.
- The Virginia Tech report cited the failure of the Student Counseling Center, Campus Law Enforcement, Administration, and departments within the University, to be the primary reason the University failed to identify and act about Seung as a person of high risk.
- FERPA stated, at the time of the tragedy, “Providing the records may be released “subject to regulations of Secretary, in connection with an emergency to appropriate persons if the knowledge of such information is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other persons.”
- Highly recommended article: Chapman, K. (2009). A preventable tragedy at Virginia Tech: Why confusion over FERPA’s provisions prevents schools from addressing student violence. Volume 18:39 pages 349-385.

# Birth to Centerville

- As Seung neared graduation, his teachers and counselors encouraged him to apply to a small college. He refused, insisting that he would attend Virginia Tech(VT).
- The school felt that a federal law, FERPA, prevented them from communicating with Virginia Tech. This same law, which was changed after Virginia Tech, similarly prevented those at VT from communicating with each other or even contacting his parents.
- Seung was accepted at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA, about 4 hours south of their home in Centerville, VA (Fairfax County in Northern Virginia).
- Seung graduated from Westfield High School, in Fairfax, VA, in 2003.

# 2003 - 2004

- Seung was accepted at Virginia Tech. He had a 3.58 GPA from one of the best high schools in the nation, high SAT scores, and Virginia Tech was not told he had multiple special accommodations to help him.
- Seung started his freshman year in 2003. He had never had a date, never had a job, never had a friend over for a sleep over, and had never stayed anywhere except home, with his parents and older sister.
- Probably, no student was ever less prepared to attend college that was he.
- For his first year, Seung lived in one of many large dorms. His declared major was Computer Science and Business. This fact would become important, since later, he was able to send e-mails and texts, which he did, to girls without them knowing whom they were from.
- Roommates and classmates went out of their way to befriend him.
- His parents would make the 4 hour drive down to Blacksburg, visit him, and sometimes return to Northern Virginia the same day.



# 2004 - 2005

## Sophomore Year

- Seung lived off campus with a fellow student who was rarely home.
- Several coeds filed formal complaints that he sent them unwanted and vaguely menacing messages, or left things scribbled on their white board, outside their dorm room. This would later result in him being psychiatrically hospitalized for one night.
- School officials were at a loss of what to do about the threats to multiple students, multiple dorm residents, multiple faculty, the Campus Police, the Judicial Affairs Department and faculty felt or observed. This was due to the Federal Law, known as FERPA.
- Seung changed his major from Computer Sciences to English / Creative Writing.
- He submitted a “book” to NY publishers, which was promptly rejected. His sister said he was never the same after that happened.

# 2005 - 2006

## Junior Year

### ***A fateful year, and a harbinger of things to come.***

- Dr. Nikki, distinguished English Professor, demanded Seung be removed from her class. In each class, there were fewer and fewer students who showed up. When she asked why, every student said they were afraid of Seung.
- Dr. Roy took him on in one on one tutoring, late in the day, she feared for safety in doing so.
- The Margaret Bowman Incident:
  - Seung was not invited to parties after this
- December 12, 2005: Seung sent an anonymous e-mail to Margaret Bowman. When she discovered whom it was from, she called Campus Police. They met with Seung, and told him to have no more contact with her. He followed their command.
- December 13, 2005: Seung sends a rare e-mail to his roommate, saying: “ I might as well kill myself”. The roommate called the police, who came to his room, and took him to the police station, where a MSW did a TDO, recommending he be admitted to a mental health unit.
- He was sent to a nearby hospital that Tuesday evening. The next morning, he was seen by a psychologist who spent some 14 minutes with him, wrote a short note that he was mentally ill, but not dangerous, and could be released. The Governor's Panel expressed their disbelief that he did not interview his roommates, Campus Police, the woman whom he had threatened, or anyone else.

# 2005 - 2006

- While he was on the unit, he also was seen by a staff psychiatrist, who generally agreed with the psychologist.
- Around 11 a.m., Seung went before a judge. The judge disagreed with the psychologist, and said that Seung “must” enroll in outpatient mental health treatment, and must keep all appointments.
- Seung was discharged and somehow made it back to campus. He made one appointment at the Counseling Center and never returned.
- Two things are important about this hospitalization:
  - First, it is not clear if this was an involuntary hospitalization. If so, he could not have legally purchased the two handguns that he did.
  - Second, the Counseling Center was supposed to notify the court that he was not making his appointments. They did not. In Virginia, if one is ordered into treatment and does not go, they appear before a judge, who can order them into an involuntary hospitalization for six months. This did not happen.

# 2005 - 2006

- There were two major lapses that may have prevented the tragedy. This was the first such opportunity to have done so. Doing so would have alerted his parents to his deteriorating condition, which did not happen. On April 16, 2007, his parents knew of the shootings, and called their son all day. They first found out Seung was the shooter late Monday evening when perhaps a dozen police cars showed up at their door in Fairfax.
- Seung took his last final exam on Thursday.
- On Friday, his parents came and picked him up to go home for Christmas. They knew nothing of the overnight hospitalization two days before.
- Investigators would later say Seung began planning his shooting after this hospitalization.

# 2005 - 2006

February 2006

- Dr. X, Cook Counseling Center, is fired. When he left, he “inadvertently” took 5, or possibly 6 records with him, including those of Seung Hui Cho. They remained undiscovered in his home for 3 years. Dr. X found them in response to a lawsuit filed by the families. To quote Sigmund Freud, the unconscious never rests. Later, when the Governor was asked if charges were being considered for Dr. X, he said no.
- April 13, 14 and 15: During this time, there were multiple bomb threats made by phone or messages taped to the doors of 3 of the 4 Engineering Buildings (!) Norris Hall did not get a bomb threat until the morning of April 16, 2007
- August 19, 2006: The William Morva Incident

Why April 16  
and  
Why Norris Hall?

# April 16, 2007

- First wave of shooting at West Ambler Johnson Hall (WAJ) with 2 fatalities
- The second major mistake made was the first team of police focusing on the boyfriend of one of the two who were shot. It was some two hours before they found the boyfriend returning to campus.
- As they were interrogating him, calls came over the radio saying there was another wave of shooting at Norris Hall. They left their suspect and headed to Norris Hall.
- After committing the shootings at WAJ, Seung returned to his room, changed clothes, and walked to the post office where he mailed a letter to the “Department English” and a package, later called a “Manifesto” to NBC News.

# April 16, 2007

## Seung Goes to Post Office

- Seung returned to campus, went to Norris Hall where he was taking classes.
- He chained the doors shut, proceeded to the second floor and began his rampage.
- Arriving police could not breach the front doors.
- They finally found a side door to a machine shop, shot the lock off and staged an intervention.
- When they shot the lock off the door, they heard one shot. It was Seung shooting and killing himself.

## Rescue and Recovery Began

- 32 people were killed, the shooter committed suicide, making the death toll 33.
- If a victim left the campus alive, they would survive the shooting.
- Every responding police officer, and every rescue and recovery member felt that this had to be the work of more than one shooter. None believed it could have been caused by one shooter.



# Investigations and Resulting Changes

- Virginia Tech was found to have violated The Cleary Act and fined, rare for any college or university.
- The Jean Cleary Act:
  - Named after Jeanne Cleary who was raped and murdered in her dorm room, at Lehigh University, by a fellow student in 1986.
  - This Act is a Federal Law that requires colleges to report crimes that occur “on campus” and to publish school safety policies.
  - This information is available each year in an Annual Security Report (ASR).
  - This law also requires schools to send “Timely Warnings to the School Community when there are Known Risks to Public Safety on Campus.”
  - Amended in 2013 to include all incidents of sexual violence.

# Investigations and Resulting Changes

The two biggest changes made after the President's Report (President George Bush) were:

1. FERPA was changed so that schools could legally notify families if one of their sons or daughters were felt to be in need of MH treatment.
2. The government passed laws allowing all colleges (note, colleges) to institute TATs (Threat Assessment Teams) who could expel a student found to be dangerous. This was changed after Sandy Hook.

Two notable failures of College TATs:

1. Jared Loughner, Arizona
2. James Holmes, Aurora, CO Theater Shootings

Both of these student had problems.

- Jared was expelled and told to get MH treatment and reapply. He went to a shopping center and killed several including a judge, and seriously wounded Congresswoman Gabby Gifford.
- James Holmes was a Doctoral student at a college in Denver, CO. He was about to be called to the school TAT, when he failed an exam, and was disenrolled. He went to a midnight showing of Batman, and killed many in the theater, before surrendering to police. At trial he received the longest sentence in American Legal history.

Lawsuits from the Virginia Tech Tragedy:

Many families settled, a few did not.

# Questions, Answers and Discussion