

When the Worst Case Scenario Happens

SEASONED INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS are trained to know what to do in a crisis. We have experience serving on crisis response teams or participating in crisis case reviews. We know whom to call for support when a crisis occurs. We are accustomed to crises that involve a single student, or a family. The more complicated crisis arises when there are multiple victims. A situation may occur at or miles from our institutions that requires a crisis response. Still, little prepares us for a violent event involving multiple deaths and injuries. That is what unfolded in Binghamton, New York, on Friday, April 3, 2009.

The Shooting

The American Civic Association is a community center for refugees and new immigrants to the United States. Among its services are free English and citizenship test preparation classes. It is located three miles from the main campus of Binghamton University, but only several blocks from the university's downtown center. The neighborhood houses many students who live off campus. There were four classes taking place that morning. A gunman entered through the main lobby, shooting two staff members, killing one. He entered one of the first floor classrooms, where the remaining shootings took place. He then turned the gun on himself. We would later learn that he had fired at least 98 times using two weapons. Most of the victims were shot multiple times.

At first, university officials did not know if any members of the university community would be directly affected by the tragedy. By late afternoon however, we knew that there were many people with Binghamton University connections in the building. As more information became available, the list grew longer. In the end, of the total of thirteen killed in the incident, two were visiting research scholars at the university from China and Brazil, one was the sister of a student from Pakistan, one was the mother of an alumnae from Iraq, one was the wife of a contract employee from China, and one was a graduate from the United States who was employed at the American Civic Association.

Among the four who were injured was a visiting research scholar from China, and the wife of a graduate student, from the Republic of Korea. Of the 37

remaining people who were trapped in the building but escaped safely, eleven were either graduate students, their spouses and family members, or family of Binghamton University employees. They were from China, Colombia, the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, and the Republic of Korea. The gunman, who had once taken ESL classes in the building, was from Vietnam.

A question that I was often asked throughout this tragedy was: "Why were so many members of the Binghamton University community in the American Civic Association that day, especially when the university also offers English as a second language classes?" The answer was relatively simple. The classes at the American Civic Association were free, were given in a convenient location, and the students taking the classes were generally older than the typical age of most college students.

The Crisis Team

Very quickly following the first news of the shootings, a crisis team was formed that included university police, the university communications and media office, the director of the University Counseling Center, and the associate vice president and vice president for student affairs. As the director of international student and scholar services, I was also included on the team. The president of the university was provided with frequent updates. University police maintained constant contact with City of Binghamton Police, who were in charge of the investigation.

Our first action was to attempt to identify anyone connected to the university who had been at



The Healing Process Begins

Sometimes, what most helps you heal from a tragedy like this one comes from an unexpected source. In late June 2009, I received an e-mail from Hannah Valentine, a high school junior in our local community. She was working on her Girl Scout Gold Award, the highest honor for a Girl Scout. The goal of her project was to encourage cultural exchange between elementary school-age children in her home town and in South America. I put Hannah in touch with the local friends of Professor Almir Alves, our scholar from Brazil who had been killed in the shooting. He came from a very poor family but through his persistence and diligence, had managed to pursue his goal of obtaining a PhD in his home country.

Professor Alves' wife wholeheartedly endorsed the project and identified the public school in his hometown for this purpose. Letters were exchanged among the children and translated, school supplies and games were collected and shipped to Brazil. The children in both countries were so excited to share their letters, and Professor Alves' colleagues at Binghamton University were the major contributors of the school supplies and games. Hannah described her project as important and meaningful for her, but it provided an opportunity for many of us to honor Professor Alves' memory by doing something that furthered his goals.

the American Civic Association during the shootings, including family members, so that the university could offer assistance. But, initially, names of the dead were being withheld by the city police until they could be identified and immediate family contacted. At the same time, both national and international media were picking up the story and putting it out on their Web sites. As a result of the coverage, calls from anxious family members and friends of Binghamton University students, faculty, and staff began to pour in. E-mail messages from colleagues across the country accumulated. The Crime Victims Assistance Center and the Red Cross were quickly setting up a location to meet with victims and families, and provide counseling and other support services. Binghamton University also, on its own, began to set up places for students who were victims or friends or family of victims to meet, provide group and individual counseling, and separately, to provide a place for faculty and staff who were victims, or friends or family of victims to meet and offer support services to them. This was meant to be complementary to the other services, and to take some of the burden off the other

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services when needed. The university, Red Cross, and Crime Victims Assistance Center were in daily contact with each other, and a number of other services were managed cooperatively.

Helping the Victims and Their Families

Throughout that first day, we received information about the victims. The wounded were identified first. A list of those who

Identifying the dead was taking longer than initially planned, and families were understandably panicked that their loved ones could not be found. Naturally, they feared the worst.

were known to have escaped safely was compiled by the Binghamton Police and released that night. But, there were potential victims who were not at either of the local hospitals, and were not on the list of

those who had escaped safely. They had not come home, and they were not answering cell phones. Identifying the dead was taking longer than initially planned, and families were understandably panicked that their loved ones could not be found. Naturally, they feared the worst.

We used our office's international student listserv to send messages of support and caring from our university president and from me. My message included a request for information on anyone who might have been at the American Civic Association that day. We began to hear from our population. By the early hours of Saturday morning, using our student, scholar, and dependent databases, our office had compiled a list of victims and contact information. By Saturday afternoon, Binghamton Police released the names of the deceased and began visiting their families to break the news.

On Saturday, I made my first visit to the hospital to speak with one of our wounded scholars. The director of the University Counseling Center and I made a visit to the apartment of friends of our scholar from Brazil, helping one friend prepare to make the phone call to the scholar's wife and his teenage son, to break the news of his death. The first funeral services began the following day, with a Muslim service for two women from Iraq and Pakistan who had been killed.

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Reuniting Loved Ones

Over the weekend, the Office of International Student and Scholar Services became one of the primary contact points for information and assistance. The Chinese and Korean Consulates in New York City sent representatives to Binghamton to meet with the families of their citizens affected by this tragedy. Our congressman, Maurice Hinchey, identified a staff representative to serve as liaison with the federal agencies that would be needed to assist in bringing family members from abroad to the United States. The health insurance company and medical assistance company contracted by the university to provide insurance and assistance services for international students and scholars provided guidance to our office and direct support for family members. Our

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university's Counseling Center and Employee Assistance Program worked with many of the victims who had escaped safely but were greatly traumatized. Student cultural organizations and community organizations offered their help. We heard from the faculty and administrators of the victims' academic programs. The Federal Bureau of Investigation sent staff to help run the Crime Victims Assistance Center and make connections to federal funds where appropriate.

I was constantly amazed by the ability of multiple government bureaucracies to quickly produce passports, authorize visas, procure plane tickets, and make lodging arrangements.

I met with family members of the victims who had died, continued to visit victims in the hospital, and made arrangements with families and the medical assistance company to transport the remains of loved ones

back to their home countries. Additionally, a delegation from a university in China indicated to us that they would attend the memorial service for our visiting scholar who was a member of their faculty.

Arrangements for specific family members to travel and attend to their loved ones took precedence over all my regular work, which was handled by our very capable international student and scholar services office staff. This allowed me to concentrate solely on the tragedy.

I was constantly amazed by the ability of multiple government bureaucracies to quickly produce passports, authorize visas, procure plane tickets, and make lodging arrangements. A representative from the Department of Homeland Security requested flight itineraries so that family members flying from abroad would be cleared through U.S. customs and immigration quickly.

Local Assistance and Support

The complexity of providing counseling services for family members and survivors who spoke varying degrees of English was a challenge for our local community. The Red Cross and Crime Victims Assistance Center arranged for bilingual counselors to travel to Binghamton to assess those in need.

Understandably, the staff in the Office of International Student and Scholar Services were greatly affected by this tragedy, and representatives of both university police and the Employees Assistance Program met with staff as a group early in the week following the shootings. This provided an opportunity for staff to share their concerns and be offered assistance to help cope with their feelings.

Not surprisingly, this tragedy had an enormous impact on Binghamton University and the local community. The loss of life was almost incomprehensible, and it was obvious to all that the healing process would be a very long one. While the many memorial services throughout the community and at the university were meant to both provide comfort and honor the dead, they were wrenching events which took an emotional toll. For some of my colleagues, there was

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a sense of guilt. It was the feeling that “this person would not have been in Binghamton if I had not invited him or her to come, so it is my fault that they were harmed.” For many weeks, there continued to be outreach to members of the university community. My own emotions at the time ran the gamut from horror to sadness and from numbness to anger while knowing that I needed to maintain a professional demeanor despite what I was feeling at the time. Fortunately,

I received tremendous support from family, colleagues, friends, and the university administration.

Help for the Helpers

For anyone involved in a tragedy like this, there is an attendant tiredness and fatigue. We all had to remember to get help and accept help. Most international educators are not licensed counselors or medical professionals, but we need to understand

the psychological and physical dynamics of helper overload. The “land of denial” is a place that many of us visit during stressful situations because that’s part of our way of surviving them. However, we have to recognize when we are overwhelmed, and colleagues can help us do that. There is a level of crisis that has such complexity and horror, and doesn’t resolve for such a long period of time that it exhausts the primary responders. As responders to this tragedy we needed to be mindful of our own need to be given the time to recover. A licensed professional should assess each member of the crisis team to see if additional professional assistance may be recommended. A number of the university caregivers in this tragedy voluntarily participated in individual assessments with a therapist provided to us by the State of New York, and several caregivers continued with private therapy for a period of time following the tragedy.

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The Aftermath

After a tragedy of the magnitude that we experienced at Binghamton, it was important to remember that one horrific event does not immunize you or your institution from a future horrific event. If an other event occurs, someone else may need to step in to take your place on the university crisis team if you haven’t had time to recover from the first crisis. As a very wise colleague reminded me, “If I have a broken leg I shouldn’t be expected to climb a mountain.” Those who have been successful at dealing with challenging and complex situations in the past risk having it built into others’ expectations that they will always be able to respond with the same level of endurance and skill that they’ve shown in the face of the most recent crisis. So in managing institutions and developing a crisis team, care needs to be taken to continuously train and recruit new members. **IE**

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