



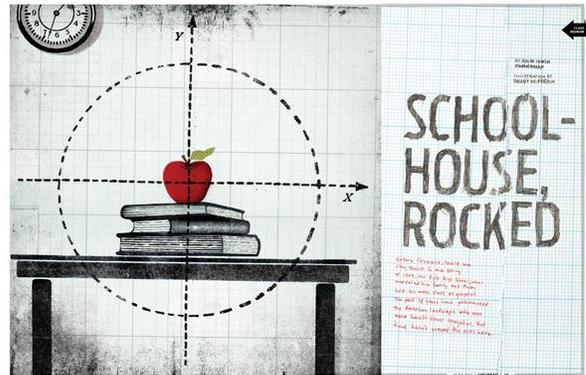
Schoolhouse, Rocked

Before Columbine, there was Clay Shroud. In the spring of 1994, the Ryle High School junior murdered his family and then held his math class at gunpoint. But time hasn't erased the scars.

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Each May, when the weather turns warm and prom season is in full swing, there are alumni of Ryle High School who think back to that terrible day. For Stephen Sorrell, who was Ryle's vice principal at the time, the reminder is a framed letter on his classroom bookshelf. It's from President Bill Clinton, commending Sorrell for his "heroism" and "selflessness." And whenever there is a school shooting—in Chardon or Columbine, Paducah or Jonesboro—the tiniest detail can come flooding back to those who were at the school that day: the ashen look on a Spanish teacher's face as she obeyed the school-wide lockdown order; the sight of junior Clay Shroud being led out in handcuffs; the wave of assemblies called to inform each grade that Shroud had killed his entire family that morning and then taken his trigonometry class hostage at the school.



The Clay Shroud who lives in the memory of many at Ryle would become an archetype in the years after his crimes: the armed teenager dressed in a black trench coat and combat boots, violating the sense of safety that once surrounded schools, especially those in small towns such as Union, Kentucky. As the number of school shootings accelerated in the late 1990s and beyond, administrators and law enforcement installed metal detectors and revamped emergency-response plans while struggling to understand what prompted these young men to act. Was it mental illness or evil? Were they bullied or abused? What were the warning signs teachers and parents could look for to prevent these horrors from happening again?

Those who were at Ryle on May 26, 1994, have had nearly two decades to contemplate these questions. They have moved on from the trauma of that day, but they admit they don't understand any better what prompted Shroud to act, or whether they'd be able to change the outcome if the scenario were repeated. Some teachers say they watch their students more carefully and reach out more readily when they see signs of trouble. And some of Shroud's classmates—now roughly twice as old as they were that day, many with careers and families of their own—say the incident made them in some ways more cautious and careful, but his crimes can never fully make sense in their minds.

As Shroul serves out a life sentence at the Kentucky State Penitentiary in Eddyville, the only certainty about the day is the sorrow those who experienced it still feel. They grieve for the four people who lost their lives that morning—Shroul’s parents, Harvey and Rebecca, who were struggling to respond to a sudden uptick in their son’s disciplinary problems, and his sisters, Kristen and Lauren, who were 14 and 12 when their brother killed them. But there is also lingering sorrow for the students who had the promise of a spring day shattered by an unfathomable series of events.

“The kids lost something that day—their sense of total security,” says Carol Kanabroski, the math teacher whose class Shroul took hostage. “They found out something bad could happen to them in a place where they should have felt secure. And I feel sorrow for them—and for me and for Steve [Sorrell]—for that.”

Shroul called his friend Richard Brown on the way to school that morning and told him he had just killed his parents and sisters. “It was like: *What? No way—how could you?*” remembers Brown, now a Boone County businessman. “The reaction was disbelief, clearly.”

Brown knew his friend had been in trouble lately. Shroul’s grades had dropped precipitously, and when his parents caught him with alcohol and marijuana, they grounded him. They took away his phone and the keys to his car and confiscated some weapons he’d collected, including knives and a BB gun. He’d also been caught at school with a stun gun.

But Brown and others who knew Shroul say he wasn’t a loner, and that his behavior didn’t seem bizarre. His friends included athletes and good students. He was smart, too, they remember—extremely smart, especially in math. His family was financially comfortable and some saw Shroul as a bit spoiled, sometimes even tooling around in his dad’s black Jeep Cherokee—the “awesomest” car a teenager could drive, one classmate remembered. He lived in one of the best subdivisions in Florence, a house with a generous carpet of green lawn in front and a large swimming pool in back. Until shortly before the shooting, Shroul held down a job at Rally’s; another classmate recalled that he quit the job by jumping through the drive-up window.

“He was somewhat dark but an average teenage kid,” says Brown. “There was a group of us who were tight and hung out a lot. To this day I don’t see him as needy or cruel.” Joe Kanatzar, who lived two doors down from Shroul and parked next to him at school, echoes Brown’s recollection. “He wasn’t mistreated; he wasn’t bullied,” Kanatzar says. “He wore black clothes and combat boots, but a lot of kids did. Even knowing the trouble he was getting in at school, and being extremely intelligent, it still doesn’t add up as to why he did what he did.”

Shroul has routinely denied all media requests for interviews, including mine, but he told investigators after the shooting that he’d set his alarm that morning for 5 a.m. He had decided to either take all the money he could find and run away, or to kill his family. He went with the second plan.

Using a gun his father kept in one of the family’s cars, he shot his parents first, then went into Kristen’s room and shot the eighth grader. On his way to his 12-year-old sister Lauren’s room, he heard noises coming from his parents’ room. When he got there, he saw that his father was still alive, so he shot him twice more, then continued to Lauren’s room and killed her. Later, when he was in custody, he told the police he killed the girls because he didn’t want them to live without their parents, and because he feared Kristen would call the police in an attempt to stop him.

He drove to the home of his prom date and picked her up, then headed to Ryle High. Ryle was a new school then, just two years old and built so big that it accommodated seventh and eighth graders that year as well. Shroul walked into Carol Kanabroski’s class, where students were

reviewing for their final exam. He was late, and he had his prom date (who attended a different school) in tow, so the teacher knew something was not right.

Kanabroski had noticed a change in Shroul in the past weeks; he'd turned in a test without writing a single thing on the paper, and she'd talked to him about his sudden loss of interest in school. Now she approached Shroul to talk about his tardiness and about the stranger he had with him. She didn't get the chance. "He warned me to lock the door because there was someone in the building who had killed his whole family," the teacher recalls. "I asked him who and he said, 'Me.' "

As he said that, he pulled out the gun, took a seat at Kanabroski's desk, and told the class to keep working.

I reached out to several people who were in the classroom that day; nearly all declined to speak to me, and the father of Shroul's prom date refused to give me her current phone number or other contact information. It's clear from the responses that what happened still affects those who were there in ways that make it difficult to talk about even now. Some also pointed out that Shroul is scheduled to be eligible for parole in seven years; they worry that he'll be set free, and they don't want to discuss the case for that reason.

There were others I reached, however, who are willing talk about that day. Carol Kanabroski is one. A cheerful woman with short blonde hair, well-loved by the hundreds of students she's taught over the years, she describes herself as an eternal optimist. But even Kanabroski tears up 18 years later when she recalls thinking that day that she might never see her children again.

She remembers what happened next in detail—how she moved through the seated students, helping them with their work. The simple classroom routine allowed her to touch their shoulders, to reassure them and prevent panic. When a knock came at the door, Shroul allowed her to answer it; it was a student who needed her signature on a form. As she stood in the doorway signing the form, Kanabroski silently mouthed to the student that the boy sitting at her desk had a gun.

The student in the hall—who also declined to talk to me—headed to Steve Sorrell's office and told him what she had seen. Sorrell, in his first year as a vice principal, couldn't believe what he was hearing; he asked the student to repeat herself. When he interviewed for the job the previous year, he'd been asked what he'd do in a hostage situation. Now he kicked those plans into action.

An all-school announcement went out over the P.A. system, asking Superintendent Ted Wetekamp to report to the main office. Wetekamp didn't work in the building; the announcement was the code to order a building lockdown. Unfortunately, many students—including Shroul—knew about the "secret" code. "As soon as they said that," Kanabroski says, "Clay said, 'They know I'm here.'"

Moments later Sorrell, a physically imposing man with a gentle manner, walked into the classroom; students, thinking he'd wandered in accidentally, called to him to leave and warned that Shroul had a gun. Sorrell told the students and teacher to leave and told Shroul he would stay. "I told him the police had been called and I laid out the options for him," remembers Sorrell. "I said, 'You can give me the gun, I can take the gun, you can shoot me, you can shoot yourself, or you can get shot by SWAT.' I said the best option was for him to give me the gun." And remarkably, Shroul did.

"I think he knew in his heart that what he had done was wrong," Sorrell says. Looking back, he supposes it may have helped that he'd had Shroul in his Algebra III class the year before. "I

think he realized I was someone he had had a relationship with, who hadn't done him any harm," Sorrell says, "and I think his self-preservation took over."

Shrout surrendered and was led from the building. When police arrived, Kanabroski told them about Shrout's claim that he killed his family. Hoping that he was bluffing, someone quickly phoned the eighth grade classroom where Kristen Shrout was supposed to be. The teacher said Kristen hadn't come to school that day. Police went to the family's house and found the four bodies, all with gunshot wounds to the head. Over the course of the day, Principal Randy Cooper called all the students, grade by grade, to the auditorium to inform them what had happened.

Of course, before he could do that, word began to spread of Shrout's takeover of his trig class. But it hadn't trickled down yet to the junior high. Erin Reardon remembers how some of her eighth grade classmates were excited about getting out of class for the assembly. But as they made their way to the auditorium, the distraught faces of teachers and older students tipped her off that something awful had happened. What principal Cooper told the assembled eighth graders confirmed her suspicions: their classmate Kristen, her sister, and her parents were dead, killed by Kristen's big brother.

"I remember thinking of all the things she wasn't going to be able to do," says Reardon, who works at Thomas More College now. "At 14, life kind of revolves around you. It's all about your friends and what you're going to do that weekend. So when it happened there was an innocence lost, and even just for a moment you step back and realize the little things you obsess about don't really matter in the grand scheme of things."

I also reached a friend of Lauren Shrout's, who asked not to be named, but who described to me the effects the shootings had on her. "For the longest time, I had nightmares about Clay shooting his family, like I could see exactly how it played out in my dreams," she wrote to me in an e-mail. "That was my first experience dealing with evil. That stuff just did not happen around Florence, especially in what was one of the nicest subdivisions at the time, but it taught me that it can happen anywhere. That incident made me lose trust in people. It's a terrible way to live because no one has ever really done anything horrible to me in a physical sense, but Clay robbed me of my trust in mankind, and I will never forgive him for that."

Memorial Day weekend came two days later, and the end of school followed shortly afterward. When school resumed in the fall for what would have been Shrout's senior year, the incident seemed all but forgotten. It may have been the natural resilience of the young. Most likely the fact that no one had been physically hurt at the school made it easier to move on.

"A lot of people didn't like to talk about it, which for me personally was hard," says Kanabroski. "For anyone under those circumstances you have a need to talk—want to talk about it. And it didn't take me too long to figure out that other people didn't want to talk about it. It was difficult because I felt like I was internalizing my emotions with no way to get them out." Many people questioned why she chose to keep the same classroom, where she teaches to this day. "This is my room," she says. "I wasn't going to let someone else chase me from it."

Shrout pleaded guilty by reason of insanity to the murders of his parents and sisters, and his first years in prison were marked by a string of disciplinary problems. From 1995 to 2002 he racked up 29 pages of disciplinary actions, and discovery of his plans to escape and his possession of a steel bar prompted his move from a minimum-security facility to a maximum-security one. According to the Kentucky Department of Corrections, he's had no apparent problems since then. He still receives visits from his grandmother, Carolyn Johnson, who declined to speak extensively with me when I reached her. "We've lost so much," she said. "Clay is still my grandson; he's still my daughter's son."

A few years ago Stephen Sorrell received a letter from Shrout. “It was one of those letters [that said], *I didn’t mean to do anything. I hope you’re all right; I hope the kids are all right. I didn’t mean to do them any harm,*” Sorrell says. “I could hear in him a need to let people see that he’s trying to say he’s sorry, but still justifying—I didn’t mean to hurt anybody. Well, he did. He hurt his sisters and his family. My reaction was, I came out better for it but I can’t say that for all the students.

“I have not returned the letter,” Sorrell continues. “I know how to get ahold of him but I don’t know what I want to say. I don’t want to be nasty to him but at the same time I want to make him understand that this is something he needs to take responsibility for.”

In the back of Sorrell’s math classroom at Ryle High School stands the other letter, the one from President Clinton. Every school year one of Sorrell’s students notices the letter and asks him about it. They are too young to remember it—this year’s class wasn’t even born yet—but they go home and ask their parents about it, and the parents usually remember. Sorrell waits for a day when there’s a little time to talk—say, the day before Thanksgiving—and he brings it up again to his students.

“It gives me a forum to tell them this is what you need to do to make sure this doesn’t happen again, that they need to treat everyone in the class with respect,” says Sorrell, who returned to full-time teaching after more than a decade in administration. “It’s made me as a teacher look for ways to build that relationship so they can talk to me. The last five years teaching I’m a better teacher because it’s not just about the math; it’s about the relationship. There are times when I see one [student] and I wonder, *Could he be? Could she be?* But kids are kids. They’re searching, and they need good solid teachers up there showing them what is right and what is wrong.”

Richard Brown received a few letters from Shrout not long after the shooting, and he suspects Shrout may have sent more that were intercepted by his own family. He’s had no contact with his former friend in years, but he admits to being curious about what the 35-year-old Clay Shrout might be like. And from the perspective of adulthood, he has continued to review his friendship and the weeks leading up to the murders for clues he might have missed. “There was alienation but at the same time there was never any hint at what he was about to do—which I’m grateful for,” Brown says. “Because if I’d seen signs and not acted, I don’t know if I’d have forgiven myself to this day.”

Having children, Brown says, has made him think about what happened in a new way. He wonders what it will be like when his daughters are the ages that Lauren and Kristen were when they died, and he remains saddened by all that was lost that day. “He was such a tremendously smart guy. Properly applied, he could have done amazing things in society,” Brown says. “You think of him not being able to have a family and his sisters not being able to have a family.”

In the months after the murders, Carol Kanabroski continued to have contact with Clay Shrout in a most unwelcome way: She had to send math assignments to him in jail as he continued to work toward high school graduation. But there have been no letters or any contact since then, and she prefers it that way. She has registered with the Kentucky Parole Board to be notified if he escapes or is paroled; she was frightened when she learned of his plans to escape years ago, and she says she will testify against his release if he ever comes up for parole.

“He doesn’t deserve to be out and I hope he never is. It was bad enough what he did to his parents—I’ve heard all the rationale about why he did it—but his sisters? They had their whole lives ahead of them,” she says. “I wish I could feel [sorry] for him, but I just can’t. What he put me through, what he put the students through, what he put the whole school through—at some point we have to pay for the things we do and he’s paying for it.”

In her home Kanabroski keeps a box that contains all the physical memories she has of the incident. There's a subpoena to testify at a hearing and newspaper clippings from that day and all the developments afterward. There are cards from students she was close to and letters from strangers.

Kanabroski's husband retired recently and she is beginning to think about retirement as well. As she thinks of packing up her house and moving, her thoughts turn to what she'll do with the box. It's not something she opens or even thinks about often, and she imagines she'll be ready to part with it when the time comes; the newspapers are old and yellowed, and she knows in excruciating detail the story they tell. But she'll keep an angel pin that a coworker gave her, a symbol of the one she believes was watching over her that day. And she'll keep the cards sent by the students she's been close to through the years, because their words still bring her comfort and satisfaction. She has arrived at school every day for the last 20 years to work in the same classroom with the students that Ryle sends her way, confident that she's exactly where she needs to be.

Illustration by Grady McFerrin

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