

The Tragedy in Room 108

An angry teen killed his teacher and forever changed a Kentucky town.

By [Jerry Buckley](#) | Oct. 31, 1993, at 12:00 a.m.

Scott Pennington had never met Charlie Decker. He couldn't have. Decker was a character in a Stephen King novel. But there were times when Pennington must have felt as if he knew Decker. Maybe even a time, like last January 18, when he felt he was just like Decker.

For most of America's students, that Monday was a holiday—in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. But in Carter County, Ky., school was in session. At 2:40 p.m., the beginning of seventh period, Deanna McDavid opened the door of Room 108 at East Carter High School in Grayson. Her senior English students were waiting for her, all except Pennington. She told the 22 students to read their assigned novels for 10 minutes, then she began correcting papers.

Five minutes later, in walked Pennington, a shy, 17-year-old honors student with thick glasses and long brown hair. He had moved to the county five months earlier. As he walked, Pennington pulled a revolver from inside his denim jacket and fired one shot at McDavid, missing her. "What are you doing, Scott?" she screamed. "Shut up, bitch," Pennington snapped. As McDavid moved her arms toward her head and dropped to her knees, Pennington squeezed the trigger a second time, sending a .38-caliber bullet into her right temple. She fell back, curled in a fetal position, still holding a pen. She was dead, one day shy of her 49th birthday.

In the hallway and nearby classrooms, teachers and students had heard the loud sounds, but few thought they came from a gun. Some thought a heavy textbook or a metal desk had been dropped on the tile floor. And even inside Room 108, some students thought it might be part of a skit arranged by McDavid. But when custodian Marvin Hicks heard the commotion, he headed straight toward Room 108. He found Pennington holding the gun in his right hand, his left hand holding his right wrist to steady his aim. "Is that thing loaded?" Hicks asked. Pennington's response was quick and brutal—one shot into the 51-year-old man's stomach. Hicks arched his back as he slumped to the floor. Within seconds, he too was dead.

"Cat got your tongues?" Pennington closed the door and sat on his slain teacher's chair. "Do you like me now?" he sneered. "Do you all think I'm crazy?" No one spoke. If they could have stopped breathing, they would have. "What's the matter, cat got your tongues? Normally you people can't stop talking."

Not all the words were the same, but the scene was tragically similar to what took place in Stephen King's 1977 book, *Rage* (written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman). In the story, Decker, a high school senior, kills two teachers and then holds classmates hostage while trying to convince them he is a hero. In the book, Decker wins approval. In Room 108, Scott Pennington would not. Not ever.

Getting no response to his taunts, Pennington removed the spent shells from his gun and inserted fresh ones. Some students say he counted his bullets, threatening, "There's one for each of you." Others recall him saying, "You don't have to worry. The next person I shoot will probably be myself."

Some of the hostages buried their heads in their hands; others pretended to read. No one wanted to make eye contact with Scott for fear he'd shoot someone just for looking. Mandy Morse started a goodbye note to her parents, telling them how much she loved them—that she was afraid she'd never see them again.

Finally, Pennington asked, "Does anyone want to leave?" They were too scared to talk. Then he offered Tammy Rucker and Angela Menefee their freedom. Menefee was the first to go. "I love you, Scott," she stammered. Rucker followed. "Thank you, Scott," she said. A few minutes later he let four more go and then more—until just five were left and Pennington said, "Okay, the rest of you get out of here." It was just after 3 p.m. Then he peered out into the hallway where police officers Keith Hill and Larry Green were waiting, guns drawn. "Did you do this?" one asked. "Yes," he allegedly replied. "The gun is on the desk."

In Carter County, Ky., guns are as much a part of life as high school basketball and tobacco fields. But until last January 18, school violence was the kind of thing folks only read about happening in Chicago, New York, or maybe Cincinnati. At East Carter High, discipline problems were mostly the run-of-the-mill variety—boys fighting with boys, girls fighting with girls. Never in their worst dreams did anyone think a killer would come to one of their classrooms.

Making schools better. Located in the Appalachian foothills in the eastern corner of the state, Carter County is conservative territory: Alcohol is not sold and liberals are not very welcome. Grayson, the county seat (population 3,500), is a typical modern town. The stores along Main Street have seen better days, but the largest Kmart in Kentucky opened last year out by Interstate 64. The county usually ranks among the state's top five in unemployment, but it also boasts many working- and middle-class people.

The schools have been among the bright spots in recent years. In 1990, Kentucky began an ambitious education reform effort, which has included spending nearly \$550 million on new schools, higher teacher pay and new curricula. East Carter High has about 600 students in grades 10 through 12. Four in 10 graduates go on to college, nearly all to Kentucky schools.

To Ross Julson, a North Dakota native who came to Carter County as school superintendent in 1990, there was nothing extraordinary about the place or its people: "The only thing out of the ordinary was in the mind of Scott Pennington. He took a completely ordinary situation and turned it into a nightmare."

towns like Grayson, schools are often the center of community life and teachers are among the best-known and most respected citizens. In the case of Deanna McDavid, the fame and respect were far beyond the ordinary. Deanna, as she was known to all, was born and raised in Carter County, and except for the years she spent at nearby Morehead State University and working in Ohio, she never left.

Her life revolved around her husband Danny, a boilermaker, their children, Brent, Lisa and Angie—and her work. For 17 years, she taught English to the bright as well as the apathetic, during the day, at night, in the summer. As a senior-class sponsor, she helped organize the prom and graduation and she led field trips near and far. If a kid needed a date for the dance or money for a tux, she took care of it. And at every home football and basketball game, she was at the gate, taking tickets and selling raffle chances. Deanna's energy level was legendary. Ruth Ann Miller, a colleague and neighbor in the Corral Park subdivision, recalls how every night when she turned out her lights, Deanna's were still on.

She stood only 4 feet, 11 inches tall and weighed less than 100 pounds, but by all accounts she was fearless. Counselor Joann McDowell recalls the East Carter group walking back to their

Manhattan hotel at 2 a.m. during a class trip to New York two years ago. "We should have been nervous," she says, "but we weren't because Deanna was leading the way."

"Miss McDavid," as she was known to students, was also one tough teacher. Many students called her "Little Hitler" behind her back. She was a strict disciplinarian who had trouble accepting anything less than best efforts. But she held no grudges. "She got angry with me plenty," says Angie Shimek. "But when it was over, it was over."

And while even her friends agree she was pushy, no one questioned her motives. "It was always the kids," says Deanna Phillips. "She would never let anyone shortchange her kids." At Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium two years ago, a group from East Carter arrived for a Reds baseball game only to learn the tickets they had been sent were for the previous day. A team official said nothing could be done. "I would have gotten on the bus and gone home," says Phillips. "Not Deanna." When she demanded to speak to the man's supervisor, her students chuckled. "We all knew this guy was in for something he could never imagine," recalls Jackson Julson, the superintendent's son. Sure enough, she returned with new tickets and the Reds employee in tow to apologize.

Deanna had a missionary streak, as McDowell and Assistant Principal Virginia Murphy were reminded on a trip to the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City last fall. They were walking along the boardwalk when a scruffy panhandler approached. Joann and Virginia kept going, afraid to look at the man, but Deanna stopped. "I think he's probably starving," she said. Her friends pleaded with her to move on, but she refused. She bought the man a hot dog, potato chips and soda. "Deanna believed she could fix the world," says McDowell.

Marvin Hicks had no such illusions, but with his easygoing nature and good humor he made East Carter High School a better place. "He never bothered anyone," says his widow, Margie. He was born and raised in Olive Hill, about 12 miles from Grayson. He was usually the first one to arrive at school, filling the pop machine and arranging the cafeteria chairs. He always had an extra quarter to lend kids for a soda and he'd make sure they heard him coming when he went to root out smokers in the boys' bathroom.

It was the same with the teachers. He responded promptly when they asked him to bring a new light bulb or to fix an old desk. Sydney Nolty remembers asking Marvin for paper towels the morning of the shooting. A week later, she found that he had delivered a whole case. She cried. No one was surprised to hear he was in the middle of the trouble at East Carter. He was, says his brother-in-law Albert Callihan, "the kind of guy who'd stop and help you if you were broke down on the interstate."

A gifted student. Marvin had special affection for kids who came from poor circumstances—kids like Scott Pennington. Gary Pennington, Scott's father, was a disabled laborer who used odd jobs and a monthly welfare check to keep the family afloat. They lived in a run-down shack in a remote area of Elliott County, but Esta Pennington, Scott's mother, kept it clean and Scott, his brother, Larry, and sister, Rachel, went to school well dressed. Scott got along with his mother but not with his father. "I never saw them fight, but there was no relationship," says Scott's aunt Hester Oney. "There was just nothing there between them."

Perhaps no one ever actually called Scott a genius, but it was clear early on that he was smarter than most any kid his age in Elliott County. As a boy, he played with the other kids and hunted with his father and uncles, although he didn't care much for shooting at animals. As he got older he preferred to read a book or play with his chemistry set. Books opened a new world beyond his rural horizon.

School was a kind of salvation, too, even for a kid who stuttered. He joined the academic team at Isonville Elementary in fifth grade, matching wits with classmates and kids from nearby schools. In seventh grade, he won the Eastern Kentucky regional science competition. That summer, school officials lent him a computer to use during vacation. In high school, he taught himself calculus.

So it wasn't surprising that Scott was upset when his parents announced they were moving to Carter County. He begged them with tears in his eyes not to move. He didn't have a lot of friends in Elliott County and he was teased some about his stuttering. Still, he knew everyone, and even those who teased him were proud of his academic honors.

But by mid-August, he was on the bus to his first day at East Carter. He didn't take long to get people's attention. When Noltly called "Gary Scott Pennington" while checking the roll for her psychology class, he gave a disapproving look. "I want to be called Scott," he declared. "My father's name is Gary and I hate my father."

He continued to flourish academically. He joined East Carter's academic team and became its star in math and science. But there were signs his transition was not going well. Some students on the bus called him "nerd head" and continually asked why he read so much. He became more of a loner, often sitting apart. In psychology class, he made it clear to classmate Donnie Malone that he didn't care much for teachers. Scott "believed he was smarter than most of his teachers," says Malone. "He said they were all hypocrites."

Disturbing words. Several times, at the urging of teachers, classmates tried to befriend Scott. But he wasn't interested. "I don't need any friends," he told one girl. In November, a class bully picked on him and they got into a fistfight. Scott's glasses were broken. But Deanna McDavid sent them to Doc Webb, a local optometrist, and had them back to Scott before he boarded the bus for home. In December, when a few classmates wished him a good Christmas vacation, he told them, "It will be the same hell, just a different place."

Deanna was looking forward to spending Christmas with her family, but when she left school for the holiday, Scott was on her mind. She had given him a C for his midterm English grade and he was upset. His other grades were all A's and B's and he didn't want a lower mark blemishing his record. He asked her to change it, but she said no. But beyond the grade, Deanna was worried by several things he had written. As part of the state's curriculum reform, students were required to write much more and to keep portfolios. Scott's writings were laden with violence, death and dying. Deanna wondered how much of that macabre writing simply mimicked what he read and how much reflected how he felt himself. She feared he might kill himself.

His sympathetic essay on King's book *Rage* worried Deanna. But there was more. When she assigned the class an essay entitled, "The Worst Day of My Life," Scott wrote about the day he was born. Meanwhile, several of his classmates, including Cody Keneson, say Scott had been telling them how much he hated "the bitch." He talked about blowing up Miss McDavid's mailbox and "getting a gun for her."

When school resumed in early January, Deanna began voicing her concerns to colleagues. She called Deanna Phillips and said, "I wish he were your student so you would have to talk to him." She considered calling his parents, but they had no phone and she feared it would make things worse between Scott and his father. Most important, Deanna McDavid was reluctant to take the process to the next step because she didn't want Scott to feel she had betrayed him. She thought she was finally getting close to him. She did not see that perhaps she was getting too close, trying too hard.

On January 7, Deanna consulted Becky Walker, director of a new state youth services program. She repeated her concerns about Scott and later asked Walker about getting him help. But she remained reluctant to act. The next day she met with Walker, McDowell and Vicki Young, director of a county student assistance program. They decided they needed more information about Scott and his family. Once again, Deanna asked for time. Less than a week later, she was with him in the guidance office when Assistant Principal Murphy came by. "Deanna put her arm around Scott," Murphy recalls, "and said, 'Mrs. Murphy, tell Scott I care about him. I care about all my students.' "

Within hours of the murders, counselors from all over Kentucky descended on Grayson. But the therapy would have to play out over a much longer time period. First, Carter County had to mourn.

On Thursday, January 21, hundreds of people lined up at the Malone Funeral Home to pay their respects to Deanna McDavid. Her casket was open, but they say you couldn't tell she had been shot because the undertaker had fixed her hair to cover the bullet hole. She was dressed in her trademark school uniform—white oversize sweater and white stirrup pants. In her hands was a school bell, an award for outstanding teaching given to her at graduation in 1991.

Black bows adorned Grayson's businesses, and at noon on Friday, nearly all of them closed during Deanna's funeral at the First Baptist Church. After the fire siren sounded, there was a two-minute silence, even on the local radio station, WGOH. Two hours later, Marvin Hicks's funeral was held in Olive Hill.

In the following months, Joann McDowell and school district counseling director Allen Hall led four sessions a week at East Carter. The students held hostage in Room 108 came; so did others, including Angie Shimek, whom Scott had threatened at gunpoint in the middle of his shooting spree. The pain was palpable, and so were the anger and, for some, guilt, for not having done something to avoid the tragedy.

There was little pattern to the post-trauma reactions. One girl slept on the couch in her living room with a parent on the floor beside her. Another studied at home because she couldn't go back into the building. One boy had to sit next to the door in all his classes because he felt trapped anywhere else in the room. One day last spring, a student had a terrifying flashback when a prop for the senior prom crashed to the gymnasium floor.

All of the students held hostage by Scott now have graduated. Still, for some the tears continue. "I regret every day not being able to tell Deanna what she meant to me," says Jackson Julson, now at the University of Cincinnati. Shimek, now a senior, stops at McDowell's office every day to give or get a hug.

Scott Pennington, who turned 18 in August, has been in jail ever since his arrest. He faces two counts of capital murder and 22 counts of kidnapping. He lost his petition to be tried as a juvenile, but his attorney, public defender Hugh Convery, won a motion to move the trial, scheduled for next April, out of Carter County. Convery argued that his client could not receive a fair trial there, and most of the citizens seem to agree.

Townfolk share a pervasive fear that Convery's expected defense of insanity—or at least "extreme emotional disturbance"—will work and that sympathy for "poor Scott Pennington" will stand in the way of what they consider justice. To some, that means death in the electric chair. To others, that seems too harsh: Life in prison would be enough.

Still, there are many who feel sorry for Scott. Nearly 600 signed a petition to have him tried as a juvenile, which would have prevented him from facing the death penalty. Deanna Phillips understands—up to a point. "I grew up in a house without a toilet, but I never killed anyone," she says. "He's not the only kid from a poor family." But, she adds, "something happened to Scott that turned a productive person into a killer. Anybody who says that's not sad isn't sensitive."

Last January's events have led to several changes in Carter County schools. Backpacks, like the one in which Scott carried his gun, have been banned. Ten students, more than the usual number, have been expelled in a stepped-up effort to rid the classrooms of troublemakers. A new disciplinary code designed to "hold sacred the rights of students who come to learn" was enacted in a painstaking process involving school officials and citizens. New guidance counselors were hired for elementary schools in the belief that waiting until junior or senior high was oftentimes too late to reach students. Teachers, administrators and students have vowed to be more vigilant in spotting troubled kids and reporting threatening behavior. But all seem to recognize that there is no guarantee that what happened last January will never happen again.

Deanna McDavid's classroom was not used for the rest of the second semester. Over the summer it was repainted, the desks rearranged; Syd Nolty now teaches psychology, sociology and history there. Up on the hill in Grayson Memorial Park, the headstone on Deanna McDavid's grave was recently put in place. But there is still a gaping void in Carter County. As Deanna Phillips's husband, Jim, a reporter for the local radio station, says, "This is one of the times you can pull your finger out of the sand and the hole is still there."

"There was no slowing Deanna down," says Ruth Ann Miller, a longtime colleague and close friend. "Her philosophy was that life is too short and that sleep is mostly a waste of time. After her family, her students were the most important people in her life."

"I know Scotty. Something went wrong in his head," says Hester Oney, Scott Pennington's aunt. "I hope we find out what it was. Two people are dead, but another life has been ruined too. Scotty was gonna make something of himself."

"He was real proud of the kids at East Carter," says Margie Hicks, widow of Marvin Hicks, shown here with some of his admirers. "He'd come home and talk about them. He never minded staying late to finish a job. Life to me isn't worth living no more. That's how much it hurts."

"I would much rather be talking 10 years from now about Scott the doctor instead of Scott the murderer. But killing people is not the answer, no matter what your problems may be."

"We spend so much time worrying about the problem children that we have often failed to meet the needs of the just plain kids who come to school to learn."

"For the students who were in the room or outside in the hall, the memory of the shootings will never go away. It is a thread that binds them together. They still call each other, still check to see how others are doing. I feel sorry for the students who will never know Deanna or Marvin."

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