

BEING A SNITCH, RAT OR NARC CAN SAVE LIVES

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By Jeff Ballinger

One of the more shocking elements of last week's shooting at Santana High School in suburban San Diego was the sight of one of the assailant's friends being interviewed on television, just moments after the attack. The red-shirted boy said the shooter told friends he was planning an attack on campus that very day, but nobody believed him.

More significantly, nobody shared that information with school officials. One boy reportedly told his father, but that was not revealed until it was too late.

In the post-Columbine era, this is nearly unforgivable.

With all the media attention given to campus shootings in recent years, there can't be a high school student alive who hasn't been urged by school officials to come forward to an adult -- a parent, a teacher, anyone who cares -- when they have information about crimes that may occur and those that already have. There have been many stories in newspapers and on television about how important it is for students to share such information to protect their classmates and possibly themselves.

I've written a few such stories myself. Some were about a local anonymous tip line, the We-Tip School Safety Program (1-800-78CRIME). Several school-related crimes around the county have been solved because callers took the time to divulge what they knew.

There is hope. In the days after the shooting, several other incidents were foiled in California schools when students stepped forward with incriminating information.

But there is much work to be done in this society. Schools can't carry the entire load.

Santana had several prevention programs similar to the ones local schools employ, but they were not enough to overcome the pull of peer pressure.

The fear of looking foolish or stupid is a very powerful motivator in

the lives of young people. That was as true 25 years ago as it is today.

However, in the 21st century, we can no longer afford this kind of fear.

One Santana student interviewed on the radio last week said he feared telling on the boy, "in case he didn't do it."

The day after the shooting, a class of Cal Poly students had a similar response. They said they would not go to authorities if they heard a classmate make violent threats against other students.

"They'd be embarrassed if it turned out to be nothing," the instructor said, summing up their reasoning.

Far better to be embarrassed than to have blood on their hands.

Of course, the boys who heard the threats didn't cause this disaster (although school officials have expelled them, in part, for their own safety). There's plenty of blame to go around, in addition to the shooter, when something like this happens: the kids who bullied this boy, as well numerous inattentive parents and school officials.

But this could have been prevented, and it wasn't.

That's not only a crime, it's a shame.

Former teacher Jeff Ballinger covers K-12 education for The Tribune. Story ideas and news tips can be given to him at 781-7908 or at jballinger@thetribunenews.com .

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WHAT ABOUT KIDS WHO WON'T STOP TEASING?

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By Jeff Ballinger

The mother of a local teen called me about last week's column on the power of peer pressure that keeps students from telling on each other, even if it means people could die.

She shared a comment her son made, after hearing about the boy who shot his classmates at Santana High School in Santee.

She said her son responded with something to the effect of, "Good for him. He got them back."

After recovering from the shock, she inquired further. It turns out her son has something in common with the Santee boy, and probably far too many other boys.

Classmates on a regular basis tease him, in this case about a physical characteristic that ever so slightly sets him apart from the others. The local boy identifies with what the shooter had experienced, but assured his mother there was no chance he'd take up arms against his classmates.

That there are any youngsters out there who empathize with the Santee shooter is a sad commentary on our society.

However, I am grateful that the overwhelming majority of boys who are mercilessly teased don't resort to taking murderous revenge.

Granted, we should refrain from thinking the rash of campus shootings in recent years has reached epidemic proportions. Children are far more likely to die at their own hands, by alcohol-related accidents and from AIDS.

I heard a colleague say children are far more likely to be hit by lightning than be gunned down by a classmate. I don't doubt it.

Of course, having this perspective doesn't address what we are going to do about the students who do the teasing.

By we, I mean all of us. This is not a job just for teachers, counselors or administrators. Parents and other community members need to be involved.

This is society's problem to try and fix. The same society that produced the murderous Columbine boys has produced adults who are serial killers and mass murderers.

I would hate to think that, since these types of adult crimes have existed for much of our history, the juvenile aberrations of them are here to stay.

Asset development

Although this term sounds as dry as California Valley in August, it is a growing movement designed, in part, to address the issues mentioned above using a positive approach.

I've read numerous descriptions of asset development, and have always had difficulty truly understanding what it is. I may finally have gotten it.

Think of it as a life-long scavenger hunt, where the object is to gather as many assets as possible and incorporate them into one's life. The earlier in life this occurs, the better.

With this goal in mind, the Asset Development Network of San Luis Obispo County and the County Office of Education will host a youth summit this weekend. More than 100 local teens and adults will participate in workshops, interactive exercises and a dance.

Using research from the Search Institute, the national movement lists 40 assets that, when present in the lives of young people, result in healthy futures. The list includes assets such as: No. 4, Young person experiences caring neighbors, and No. 26, Young person places a high value on helping other people.

These may seem head-slappingly obvious, but think of them like manners: if we don't teach our children about them, how can we expect our children to use them?

To learn more about asset development, log onto the www.sloassets.org Web site and see how you can help.

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MOVING CAN BE A TRYING TIME FOR YOUNGSTERS

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By Jeff Ballinger

In an e-mail response to a recent column, local writer Susan Amerikaner said stories about the young boy accused of murdering his classmates at Santana High School jogged her memory.

Nearly 20 years ago, while researching for a series of "Just Say No To Drugs" books she was writing, she listened to hours of taped interviews of teens in various drug rehabilitation centers.

In trying to spot the common denominator, she came to a surprising discovery, she said. Although many of these children grew up neglected or with just one parent, many others said they had stable home lives.

However, the most common link was that nearly every student had recently moved with their families before they got in trouble with their grades or with drugs.

The Santana shooter had recently moved from Maryland to the San Diego area.

"Moving is often a horrific experience for children and teens," Amerikaner wrote in an e-mail last week. "Finding their bearings in a new home is far more difficult than we adults seem to realize."

Happy hour

Parents of elementary school children countywide should get a letter from the Arts Council of San Luis Obispo County this week, asking for contributions to the "Art Ops for Schools" campaign. Ops is short for opportunities, which the council hopes to increase by raising \$26,000 to provide access to the arts for public school students next school

year.

The money raised will be distributed to local schools -- each one will get a grant application in May -- to pay for tickets and/or transportation to arts events. Parents will be asked to contribute an amount equivalent to one billable hour of their time.

Of course, you don't have to be a parent of an elementary school student to contribute. Just contact the Arts Council at 544-9251.

It's only a test ... Or is it?

Gov. Davis has added another component to his somewhat controversial testing program, which has, as its main feature, a statewide test for students in grades two through 11, and upon which an elaborate multi-million dollar rewards system is based.

Also included in that program is the new high school exit exam, which the current batch of freshman will have to pass to graduate.

The governor says that, since the Census Bureau has determined that whites now make up less than half of California's population and Hispanics are the fastest-growing group, students ought to learn Spanish as well as English.

So, the governor announced Sunday that one portion of the new high school exit exam will be given in Spanish.

That doesn't give much time for this year's freshmen to prepare, and gives high schools less time to hire new Spanish teachers to cover the added classes.

But those who have been paying close attention will realize the date of the governor's announcement and understand there's nothing to worry about.

It's a day late, but happy April Fools' Day.

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