

IN MOMENT OF TERROR, TWO HEROES EMERGE

PAIR OVERPOWERS TEEN GUNMAN, FREES ARROYO HIGH CLASSMATES FROM HOSTAGE SITUATION

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Page: A1

Lines: 136

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Without warning, the 15-year-old boy walked to the front of his sophomore English class at Arroyo Grande High School and said, "Everybody shut up. I have an announcement to make."

He next held up a handgun, cocked it and pointed it at teacher Carolyn Swanson. Ordering her and the 30 students to sit down, the teen ordered that the blinds at the side of the room be closed.

"I just figured he was going to kill kids," said Clay Gheza, a 15-year-old in the class. "He had three clips (of bullets)."

Unlike the nightmare that unfolded at Columbine High School, however, this horrific scene Friday morning ultimately ended without anyone being hurt, thanks in large part to the quick thinking shown by Clay and Jonathan Griswold, 16.

They were able to pin the boy against a table and keep him there until Floyd Weber, a school administrator, rushed in and yanked the gun from the teen's grasp.

Terrified classmates ran crying and screaming from Room 207, and school officials put the campus into an hour-long "lockdown" following the 9:11 a.m. incident to ensure that all was secure.

The boy was taken into custody by Arroyo Grande police, who did not identify him. On Friday night he was being kept at the county Juvenile Services Center. Mental health officials were interviewing the youth, authorities said.

Police took the student into custody on suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon because he allegedly pointed the gun at his teacher; possession of a weapon on campus; and restricting the freedom of others, all felonies.

Carrying the weapon onto the campus also violated the state Education Code and district policy.

Authorities were unsure of how the teen got the gun.

School administrators offered immediate counseling to the students who had been in Swanson's class, and most went home with their parents.

None of the students had any inkling that this day would be anything but routine.

Standing in front the class, the teen pulled the gun out from either his pants or jacket, Jonathan said -- he wasn't sure exactly. Students said he then asked classmates to close the window blinds.

Moments later, another teacher who happened to be in the class at the back of the room ran out the open door.

Unaffected, the youth began complaining about his family life and told the class he had been working "on a plan" all week, but did not say what he was going to do.

"When he was talking, he was tossing it (the gun) back and forth between hands, like he was nervous," Jonathan said.

"It was pointing at all of us."

Swanson tried to reason with the teen, as did several students, including a close friend, according to several of the teens in the class.

Jonathan, who was in the last seat on the right side of the room nearest the door, said he stood up and closed the blinds when the boy asked that to be done -- but only partway. The 15-year-old noticed and walked toward the back of the room to check on the blinds.

At the same time, Jonathan said he walked between desks to the front of class and circled back to move in behind the teen.

"I sort of snuck up behind him," Jonathan said. "I pushed his arm and pinned him to the table. Clay helped hold the gun down till administrators came in and helped."

Jonathan said the student's finger was on the trigger of the gun during the struggle, and that he held it with both hands as Jonathan and then Clay pushed him up against a table and wall in the corner of the room. While they had the youth immobilized, Jonathan said, the rest of the students ran out of the room to safety.

"It was all God's doing," Jonathan said. "I don't know how he didn't notice me coming from behind."

Principal Robin Kisinger said counseling was available for the students in Room 207 and for all students who asked for it. She said counseling would also be available when school resumes Tuesday after the holiday weekend.

Hundreds of students contacted their parents by cell phone to pick them up and take them home. Yet school was not canceled, and student events and athletics were held as scheduled.

Swanson could not be reached, but Kisinger said she was calm and initially wanted to teach the remainder of the day.

Kisinger told her to take the rest of the day off.

Swanson is an English and drama teacher who is also a longtime organizer of the annual summer Central Coast Shakespeare Festival. Her colleagues said she commonly tests the limits of her high school drama students by choosing challenging plays to perform, such as "Bye Bye

Birdie" and "Romeo and Juliet."

After being taken into custody, the youth was interviewed by a county crisis worker and counseling sessions with him will likely continue, said Arroyo Grande police Cmdr. Steve Andrews.

Police had no past encounters with the youth, said Andrews, and as far as he knows there were no contacts with the county Mental Health Department. "But I hope those people can help him," he said.

Andrews' department, like others all over the county, received special "active shooter" training from the Sheriff's Department after the Columbine shootings in 1999. Its purpose is to shoot to disable or kill when classrooms are taken over by armed suspects.

A four-officer team arrived, moments after school officials called, and was ready to deal with the suspect, Andrews said. The incident was resolved before they got to campus, said Andrews, "because of those kids who took him to the ground."

—Staff writers Ryan Huff and Carol Roberts contributed to this report.

Caption: (1) TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP - Arroyo Grande High School Principal Robin Kisinger thanks Clay Gheza, 15, left, and Jonathan Griswold, 16, who pinned the armed suspect and held him until administrators arrived. She said she would never ask a student to do what they did, but that she was grateful for their efforts.

(2) TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY DAVID MIDDLECAMP - While Clay Gheza and Jonathan Griswold held the suspect, their classmates raced out the door of Room 207 at Arroyo High.

(3) - School official Cynthia Fogarty tells students who don't have a permission slip to leave campus that they must go to class after the lockdown ended Friday.

(4) - After the gun incident at Arroyo Grande High School was over Friday, the emotions came out.

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