

New details on gunman in US university shooting

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18 February 2008

New information has emerged about Steven Kazmierczak, the 27-year-old man who opened fire on a classroom at Northern Illinois University (NIU) in DeKalb last Thursday, fatally shooting five students before turning the gun on himself. As of this writing, at least six students remain hospitalized from wounds suffered in the attack, none in critical condition.

In the wake of the tragedy, the university and surrounding community sought to come to grips with the tragedy that took five young lives in addition to the shooter. All were from Illinois, and included Catalina Garcia, 20, of Cicero; Daniel Parmenter, 20, of Westchester; Ryanne Mace, 19, of Carpentersville; Julianna Gehant, 32, of Mendota; and Gayle Dubowski, 20, last of Carol Stream. Northern Illinois University is the destination of choice for the children of many working families in the suburbs of Chicago.

Kazmierczak was a recent graduate of NIU with a degree in Sociology and was currently a student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he entered graduate school in the Department of Social Work. To this point, there seems to be no explanation of why he returned to NIU and why he chose the particular class where he opened fire.

According to what is known so far, he did not fit the typical profile of someone who would lash out with such violence. NIU President John Peters said Kazmierczak compiled “a very good academic record, no record of trouble,” at the 25,000-student campus. He had served as an officer in two student groups promoting understanding of the criminal justice system, and had won two awards at the university.

It is known that Kazmierczak had a history of mental illness and had recently quit taking a medication reportedly intended to regulate an anxiety disorder. The medication’s name has not yet been revealed. But in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, reports have focused on what appeared to be a personal history seemingly incongruous with that of a killer.

Kazmierczak had been a successful student at both UNI and the University of Illinois. Professors he had befriended at both schools, along with friends and acquaintances, expressed shock that Kazmierczak could have been responsible for such an act.

He had won two academic awards at NIU and served as vice president of a student group that studied the criminal justice system. UNI police Chief Donald Grady said that Kazmierczak

“was revered by the faculty and staff and students alike.”

Jim Thomas, Kazmierczak’s sociology professor at NIU, described him as “the most gentle, quiet guy in the world.... He had a passion for helping people.” Thomas was impressed enough by Kazmierczak that he made him a teacher’s aide.

On January 22, Kazmierczak wrote Thomas an e-mail from Champaign in which he contemplated law school and other future plans. “Everything is going well at UIUC, as I am just starting my third semester here, and am about half-way done with the academic portion.... I really believe in the cliché now that the further I go in college, the less I realize I know about a multitude of subjects. All I know is I want to work [in criminal justice] in some capacity; as a social worker or as an overly litigious advocate of prisoners.”

Kasmericzak grew up in the predominantly working-class Chicago suburb of Elk Grove Village, which is located between Chicago and O’Hare International Airport. He was a B student, was in the marching band, studied Japanese, and was on the chess club. His parents later moved to Florida, and his mother since passed away.

According to the Associated Press, after graduating high school in 1998, Kazmierczak was placed by his parents in a psychiatric treatment center in Chicago, reportedly for being “unruly” at home. Louise Gbadamashi, an employee at Thresholds-Mary Hill House, said that Kazmierczak “never wanted to identify with being mentally ill. That was part of the problem.” He used to cut himself and had resisted taking his medications.

Kazmierczak joined the army in September 2001, but received an “administrative discharge” six months later before completing basic training, reportedly for psychological reasons. A defense official did not characterize the precise nature of the reasons leading to Kazmierczak’s discharge, citing the Privacy Act. If more details were available about this episode in the young man’s life, it might shed some light on his subsequent development.

As an undergraduate at Northern Illinois University, he completed quite serious academic work, including a paper that listed his interests as “corrections, political violence, and peace and social justice.” At the time, Kazmierczak also said he was interested in “the role of religion in the formation of early

prisons in the United States.”

Jan Carter-Black, an assistant professor in UIUC’s School of Social Work and Kazmierczak’s academic advisor, said that he was “a nice person; he was a nice kid. I found Steven to be a very committed student, extremely respectful of me as an instructor and advisor.”

He worked briefly last fall at the Rockville Correctional Facility in western Indiana, which seemed to relate to his academic interest in criminology. Acquaintances said he had wanted a career in the prison system. But after a little more than two weeks, he unexpectedly left the job before completing basic training, according to a spokesman for the Indiana Department of Corrections. The reasons for his departure are at this point unclear, but perhaps some experience at the prison led him to abandon the job so quickly.

Kazmierczak had evidently recently broken up with a longtime girlfriend, but still shared an apartment with her. One acquaintance of the couple described their relationship as “rocky” and Kazmierczak as abusive, while others did not. The woman had recently received packages at their apartment for gun accessories. Police reported that Kazmierczak told her to wait until Valentine’s Day to open them, which suggests premeditation in the NIU shootings.

There is still no explanation as to why Kazmierczak chose to travel to UNI and attack the classroom he did. He went to DeKalb several days before the killing, checking into a hotel under the name “Steven.” Authorities found more ammunition in the room in duffle bags with their zippers glued shut.

In an ironic twist, the same Wisconsin-based online gun dealership sold weapons to both Kazmierczak and to Seung-Hui Cho, who shot and killed 32 people last April at Virginia Tech. On February 4, Kazmierczak placed his order for two Glock 33-round magazines that increased his firearm’s ammunition capacity. On the same day, he purchased handguns in Champaign, where he lived.

Doubly disturbing about Kazmierczak’s killings is that the usual remedies suggested to avert these sorts of attacks—“rapid response” and “profiling”—could likely have done nothing to stop them.

In fact, in the wake of the Virginia Tech killings of last April, UNI had installed a rapid response system. By all accounts, university officials and law enforcement reacted expertly to the situation. But the rapidity of Kazmierczak’s attack and suicide could not possibly have allowed for an effective response.

As for profiling, a police spokesman commented, “There were no red flags. He was an outstanding student. We had no indication at all that this would be the type of person to engage in such activities.” A professor who knew Kazmierczak was explicit: “Profiling would not have worked with Steve. People would let him into their home.”

Only two days before the killing, Kazmierczak spoke with his godfather about playing chess sometime soon. Richard Grafer told a reporter that he “seemed fine, great. We were laughing

and talking and telling jokes.” According to the police timeline, however, Kazmierczak would have already been checked into the DeKalb Travelodge Hotel when he spoke to Grafer.

Taken in isolation, details of Kazmierczak’s life would not appear to suggest a particularly violent type, and there is no reason that he could have been “spotted” even by those closest to him. Perhaps in retrospect, a certain fascination with violence can be detected. As a high school graduate he inflicted cuts upon himself, and as an undergraduate he studied self-inflicted violence in the prison system.

He was a gun enthusiast and advocate of gun ownership; he joined the Army; worked briefly as a prison guard; he had some tattoos with violent imagery drawn on his arms. However, these characteristics could hardly be taken as predictors of a youth who might become a homicidal maniac.

Contrary to the popular perception promoted by the US media, research has demonstrated that there is no demonstrated “type” when it comes to the school shootings that have been growing in frequency across the nation. A 2002 study carried out by US Secret Service and the US Department of Education of several dozen school shootings concluded unequivocally that “there is no accurate or useful ‘profile’ of students who engaged in targeted school violence.” Psychological difficulties obviously play a role, but the majority of school shooters studied also had no history of mental illness. The majority also could not be described as “loners.”

The only clear pattern that emerges in comparing the growing number of school shootings is that there is a heightened tendency among youth to turn to extreme violence in periods of personal crisis. The phenomenon needs to be examined not simply as the product of the psyche of the individual shooter, but as indicative of a crisis in contemporary America with profound social roots.



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