

...a jolt of pure fear

By Russell Pangborn

I was in a squash court at the **York University** campus and was just going to take a swing at the ball when the lights suddenly went out. Usually after a minute your eyes adjust to the surroundings in this type of situation and gradually some objects become slightly visible. Not this time. Two minutes later I still could not see my hands, which at the time were extended like **Frankenstein's** as I attempted to locate the corner of the room where my knapsack was sitting. I later told some of my fellow teachers next door at Seneca that this was an incredibly helpless feeling. At that time I was fearful that someone was going to walk in with a flashlight and blow me and my daughter away. They all said, "Why would you jump to that conclusion?" I'll tell you why...

About 23 years ago I was a new sessional teacher at the **Sheridan College** Brampton campus. While turning a corner after finishing a class I encountered a lone student with his back up against a locker holding a large gun pointed at the ceiling. He looked like he was getting ready to pounce on somebody coming from my direction. I felt a jolt of pure fear. Fortunately he hadn't picked up that I was passing him by which allowed me to hurry off to the teacher's offices. Unfortunately the offices were locked which elevated my panic level. Somebody noticed me at the door and let me in and then relocked the door. Inside were a bunch of fearful teachers. They knew about the student with the gun. Most hadn't seen him. I wished I had not seen him.

One of the teachers, **Malcolm**, came up to me and asked, "Can you run my test at 2:00? I need to stay here for the police and identify the student with the gun". Being the new guy, I said okay. Today it doesn't make sense that a test would still be run while a student with a gun roamed the halls. Schools have better policies



in place after several school shootings have occurred—but on that day, this test was not going to be cancelled.

I am not proud to say—this was my first **George Costanza** moment. (There is a famous bit where George tries to escape danger by holding up women and children in front of him.) After Malcolm left, I reasoned that this student must have been planning on shooting Malcolm during the test. He now would burst into the room and only see me. I would be the consolation prize. There was a person in the office area who I had said Hi to on a number of occasions. He always wore a shirt and tie and was newer than me. I went over to him and told him that there was a test going on that conflicted with my other plans on helping Malcolm with the student identification. He told me it would not be a problem to run the test.

A swat team arrived on the campus and took the student down. It turned out that this student was carrying a replica gun. The event made all the newspapers. The person who ran Malcolm's test turned out to be a student. He did a good job. Fortunately Malcolm thought this was hilarious. I'm sure the other students were wondering who you had to know at the college to get to run a big test.

A second incident occurred at **Seneca College** about 15 years ago. My job as a student coordinator was to see a student who had been asked to leave our program. He not only failed one of my classes, he had failed all of his classes, one too many times. He told me his wife would leave him if he could not get back into the program. I had to tell him that this was not a good enough reason for our department to reconsider the decision. A few weeks later a student had warned our Dean that this person was talking about gunning down the Computer Studies teachers. The disgruntled student had said that **Mark Lepine** had a good idea, but a better one would have been to blow away the teachers.


This person's personality had always struck a few people as being a bit "off". I was informed of the threat but did not think

too much of it. After these horrible school shootings we always talk about warning signs that should have been noticed. Sometimes they are not because there a lot of empty threats are made. These days an empty threat can get you in trouble.

The next semester I was teaching a class in a lab that had a large glass wall overlooking a library. Halfway through the class I saw this expelled student standing in the library at the glass pane with his hands on his hips staring intently at me. Since he had been asked to leave the college, there was no reason for him to be there. All of a sudden the threat did not seem so empty. He stayed like that for about five minutes. This made me feel very threatened. I certainly wasn't one of his most favourite people. Luckily this turned out to be a non-event. He left before my class was over.

As teachers we sometimes have to give people bad news. Managers also find themselves in this position. It is only a very very tiny percentage of people who can't cope and become a threat. Actually in school shootings teachers are not always the main target. Sometimes they are just one of the side casualties of a shooter motivated by different reasons.

Anyway, back at the darkened York University squash court, I could hear several people chattering loudly in an adjacent court. I told my daughter, a student at York, to be quiet and to try and feel for the squash door and make sure it was closed. At that moment in time, George Costanza was in my past. All my effort was going to be making sure my daughter was okay—whatever it took.

Silly teacher, silly parent—it wasn't just the squash courts without lights. Several buildings at York and Seneca were blacked out. Someone actually did come with a flashlight after what seemed like an eternity—about ten minutes. It was only to lead us out. It appears that my rational/irrational fear has now been passed down to the next generation. 

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