

by NOEL BECCHETTI

# When Violence Hits Home

ON MARCH 5, Charles “Andy” Williams entered Santana High School in Santee, California, just outside of San Diego, carrying a .22-caliber pistol and began shooting at his fellow students. He killed two people and wounded thirteen others. On March 22, Jason Hoffman entered Granite Hills High School in nearby El Cajon, with a shotgun and a pistol. Hoffman’s target was Dan Barnes, who is dean of students at the school and a member of Community Covenant Church in El Cajon. Hoffman fired at Barnes and several students, injuring five people. He was subdued before anyone was killed. The two incidents were part of a growing number of school shootings in the United States. We asked Noel Becchetti, a member of Community Covenant Church, to write about the affect this has had on the church, and to give some feedback on what churches can do in response. —The Editors

**S**o we’ve come through the latest series of school shootings. The first fierce wave of scrutiny is over and the media has moved on. Classes are back on schedule at Santana and Granite Hills High Schools.

Now what? How can, and should, we in the church respond in the face of such insanity? What can we do to make a difference in a society that seems to be spiraling into an ever-increasing whirlwind of senseless violence?

I’ve got no simple answers, but I do have some thoughts. They come from many years of experience ministering in urban communities, where young people have been under the shadow of

street violence for years, well before Jonesboro and Columbine. And they have been honed very intensely over the last few weeks. Santana High School is about three miles from my front door. A member of our church works in their school library. One of our church’s kids saw one of the students get shot. And Granite Hills is less than a half-mile from our church. Several of our kids attend there; several of our adults work as faculty or staff there. And the primary target, Dan Barnes, was the church’s high-school director for several years and is still a member. Short of a family member being involved, it doesn’t get much closer.

Accompanying this article is some

great input from our church’s staff, who were involved in both incidents (see page 11) and from Dan Barnes (page 9). The following is my two cents. And I’ll be honest: I’m writing this in a very bad mood. Regarding youth violence and our societal indifference to it, I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.

## **Enough Guns, Already**

When will we face up to the fact that the United States is one of the most dangerous countries on the planet? It’s time to get serious about developing and implementing gun-control policy. I’ve had it up to here with people saying, “Guns don’t kill people—people



kill people.” If that’s so, why do countries like Sweden, Norway, France, Switzerland, and Costa Rica—all of which have strict gun-control policies—have such low rates of homicides compared to ours? And I mean per-capita rates, not raw numbers. We kill people with guns way out of proportion to any other country on earth.

It’s intriguing to see the reactions I often get when I mention gun control. I had the chance to field-test these thoughts in a talk I gave recently at

Covenant Bible College in Strathmore, Alberta. After the talk, several of the students (all male) came up to challenge me about gun control. They all said the same thing: “I don’t want the government taking all my guns away.” “That’s not what I said,” I replied. “I said gun control, not confiscation. Why is it that when I say ‘gun control,’ you hear ‘confiscation?’” No one could give me a straight answer.

Does this mean that we might have to give up some of our rights? You

bet—but maybe it’s time to cede some of our rights for the sake of what is right. And I’ve got nothing against hunters and target-shooters, but if creating a saner environment means you can’t have a Glock-9 with a fifteen-round clip or a semi-automatic assault rifle (which can be easily converted to fully automatic), so be it.

Will there be problems with such

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policies? Will there be loopholes that unscrupulous people can exploit? Of course, but we've got to start somewhere. Just throwing up our hands and saying, "There's nothing we can do," isn't going to cut it anymore.

So what does that mean for us in the church? It means we get active in our local communities. We let our elected officials know that this is a front-burner issue. We make it clear within the community that gun-owning adults had better know how to secure their weapons so that young people cannot reach them. We take a stand—and we don't back down.

### **Pull the Plug**

Movies, television, video games, and computer games are all multi-billion-dollar businesses. Advertisers spend enormous amounts of money to reach consumers via the media. Major media events are viewed by tens of millions of people at a time. So why are some people still claiming that media content doesn't really affect people's actions and attitudes? Who are we kidding?

My wife and I attend very few movies, and we're very selective of what we watch on television. Why? Because so much of our entertainment media is drenched in violence. If you don't believe me, cruise through your local video store sometime. Count the number of films and video games

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that have violent themes, with slick pictures of guns, other weapons, and explosions on their covers. It's sick—and it's having an effect on our kids, and on us.

We don't have to support this kind of stuff. We can be active in searching out healthier media alternatives, and healthier non-media entertainment alternatives. We can be diligent in screening the kind of video games our children play. Am I promoting censorship? If censorship means trying to

stem the flood of wanton human massacre that dominates so much of our media entertainment, then yes, I am.

### **Teach Our Children Well**

The Columbine, Santana, and Granite Hills shootings all featured a twist that I've not seen in my years of exposure to urban youth violence. Unlike urban youth violence, which revolves around gang, turf, and drug issues, these



suburban shootings involved young people who were regarded as outsiders—loners, social outcasts, without the looks, athletic talent, or other attributes that are valued by the in-crowd. And if you've been around a

group of kids of any age, you know how cruel kids can be to those who don't fit in, how they can taunt and bully kids who are weak. The chilling fact is that kids who are alienated, who feel that they don't matter, are becoming increasingly capable of acting out their angst in a lethal manner.

lovely. As adults, we need to be intentional about reaching out with love and affection to those same kids we find in our churches and communities. One thing I've always appreciated about Community Covenant is that our adults have gone out of their way to affirm and nurture one another's kids. And there are several of our adults who have a special gift of reaching out to the difficult kids. It's made a huge difference in the quality of life in our church. And remember, it may be one of our children who needs that special care and nurture.

It is time to teach our children what real friendship means. I'm all for our children having healthy friendships, but as Christians, we need to be intentional about helping our kids reach out to their unlovely peers, as well as the

lovely. As adults, we need to be intentional about reaching out with love and affection to those same kids we find in our churches and communities. One thing I've always appreciated about Community Covenant is that our adults have gone out of their way to affirm and nurture one another's kids. And there are several of our adults who have a special gift of reaching out to the difficult kids. It's made a huge difference in the quality of life in our church. And remember, it may be one of our children who needs that special care and nurture.

### **You Can Run but You Can't Hide**

When the Columbine atrocity took place, there was an unprecedented wave of media attention regarding youth violence. There was also a huge reaction within the youth ministry community—that is, the white youth ministry community. Most of them had been unaware of the problem youth violence has been for years in urban schools.

While in no way condoning the horrific actions of Columbine, some of my urban ministry friends were shaking their heads saying, “Funny how when affluent white suburban kids get hurt, everyone starts paying attention.”

Historically, the Anglo Protestant church has had a consistent reaction to changing neighborhoods with increasing ethnic diversity—run. When we have had the economic means to do so, we have moved into gated communities and believed we could insulate ourselves from threats of urban life.

The problem is, those threats have made their way out to our safe enclaves. Behaviors that we attributed only to poor, urban environments are now with us all. The phrase repeated over and over again out here within the last few weeks has been, “I never thought that something like this would happen here.” Well, it did. And don’t kid yourself—a private Christian school could be just as vulnerable to youth violence as a Santana or Granite Hills.

So what do we do? We can keep running, put up more barriers, and leave the nitty-gritty work of dealing with our young people, especially our at-risk young people, to others. Or, we can turn and wade into our communities as active volunteers and role models. We don’t need any special talents; we don’t even need to be parents. All we need is to be willing to invest our time, ourselves, and perhaps some of our resources.

### **Rollin’ Up Our Sleeves**

Simple solutions? Nope. Quick fixes? Sorry. Guarantees that this won’t happen again, even in our own backyard? Afraid not. But if we in the church will get up to our necks in our communities, take on the hard issues and unpopular stances, and become a living, breathing presence among our young people—in our churches and on our school campuses—I’ve got to believe that God will use us to be agents of prevention, hope, and healing. I’ve got to believe that we may be able to reach some kids before they act out their pain and anger in horrific ways. And really, do we have any choice? □

## *Get Involved in Your Schools*

An interview with **Dan Barnes**



**DAN BARNES**, a member of Community Covenant Church in El Cajon, California, is dean of students at Granite Hills High School (GHHS). He was also the intended target in the recent shooting at the school. (In one of the more unbelievable aspects

to this story, Dan’s father, Daryl, also an educator, was involved in one of the first U.S. school shootings, in 1979 at Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego.) Still early in his process of working through the trauma of being shot at by student Jason Hoffman, Barnes sat down with Noel Becchetti and shared his thoughts on what we can and need to do to better reach our young people.

**Barnes has been a teacher, coach, volunteer, and staff youth pastor. Previous to his current position at GHHS, Dan served nearly four years as part-time high-school director at Community Covenant Church in El Cajon, California. He and his wife, Valerie, have three children: J.T., Ryan, and Emily.**

**Noel Becchetti:** You’re a professional educator, a Christian, and an experienced youth minister. Looking from your different perspectives, what needs to be done to reduce the chances of this type of violence from happening again?

**Dan Barnes:** From a professional point of view, several things. First, we need to accept the fact that we must have a stronger law enforcement presence on campus. We need police officers walking the halls and in classrooms. It’s not something I’m happy about, but the fact of the matter is, deadly force is what kept the incident here from becoming deadly. [Jason Hoffman was shot and subdued by an El Cajon police officer who was on campus.]

Next, we need to invest in placing more trained psychologists and therapists on school campuses. We’re just woefully understaffed in that area, and school administrators just aren’t capable of assessing the emotional and mental states of hundreds, even thousands, of kids.

Third, our teachers need to better communicate with the parents of their students. A consistent complaint I hear from parents is, “I don’t hear enough from my kid’s teachers.” As a former teacher, I know how busy it can get, but teachers can have a perspective on how kids are doing that even a parent might not have. The more teachers and parents communicate, the better.

Fourth, we in the schools need to be better connected with the available social-service resources in our community that can supplement our on-campus staff. But from a personal point of view—actually, personal and professional both—the most important thing we need to do, especially at our high schools, is to get more adult volunteers on campus, parents and non-parents alike. There’s a saying: “Every kid needs to know at least two other adults besides their parents.” While it could sound like a cliché, it’s true. Kids need attention from and involvement with adults who care about them and are interested in their well-being.

This sort of parental involvement is common at the elementary school level, but for some reason, when kids get to high school, parents and other

adults fade away. For the 2,800 students at Granite Hills, I've got maybe twenty adults on my volunteer list.

**Becchetti:** What kind of volunteer opportunities do you mean?

**Barnes:** Anything and everything—helping out in the classroom, walking the halls, chaperoning at dances, games, and other school events, just hanging out with the kids at lunchtime. The positive influence of the presence of caring adults is incalculable.

Most schools will require you to be fingerprinted and go through a background check. Beyond that, if you are willing to get involved, they would love to have you. For the church, this can be a tremendous opportunity to have an impact with the kids from our churches and, as long as you handle yourself appropriately, an outreach opportunity with your kids' friends and other students.

**Becchetti:** What are some appropriate ways that Christian adults can have the kind of ministry impact you're describing?

**Barnes:** Again, just be there. Volunteer. Get to know kids, teachers, and administrators. As people get to know you, your faith background will become evident. At most schools, if students and/or adults ask you about your faith, you are free to share.

I've heard about church members who choose a school and intercede regularly for that school in prayer. I've also heard about individuals and groups who do prayer walks on those school campuses. There are any number of ways we can be helpful—it's all about being there and being authentic.

Recently, I've heard about some urban public schools that are allowing Christian ministers to volunteer as campus pastors for the students who want that kind of help. It's time for us in the suburban schools to be open to these kinds of models, and for the church to step up and provide those volunteers.

Some people expect the schools to solve the problems that lead to situations like Granite Hills or Santana. But we're nothing more than an overtaxed, under-resourced safety net with plenty of potential holes. We have all got to step up and do our part to reach out to

tee, or to trivialize the horror of the kids and adults, including Christians, who were killed at Columbine and Santana. All I can tell you is that I know now like I didn't know before that we're on a journey, that God is in control, and that he's going to be with us in the



our kids, most especially those of us who can offer kids not just friendship, but the love and hope of Jesus Christ.

**Becchetti:** If you'll let us get personal, Dan, what was it like to go through this?

**Barnes:** I really can't explain it—it's hard to put into words. I remember thinking, "The odds of this happening to me after it happened to my Dad are just impossible." But it did.

It's literally broken my heart. I'd honestly thought I was being a positive influence in Jason's life. For him to be so convinced that I was against him and troubled enough to try to kill me has been shattering.

But I will say this: When I do have peace—and it comes and goes—it's because I have a whole new sense of God being my provider and protector. Scriptures like Psalm 92 and Jeremiah 29:11 are real to me now. I'm not saying that I've got some sort of guaran-

good times and the bad. For whatever reason, he chose to spare me this time. I hope to get a better understanding of the reasons as time goes on.

**Becchetti:** How has going through this—and being spared—changed your thinking about the future?

**Barnes:** I've got a new urgency about the fact that we must make fostering kids' mental and spiritual wellness a top priority. I don't care where the help comes from—the public sector, the church, wherever—frankly, from every source we can get. I'm not advocating that we let just anyone get access to our kids, but we need help, and we need it now.

Personally, I don't know what the future holds. This is what I've dedicated my life to, I'm 110 percent into trying to help kids, and my original plan was to spend at least thirty years as an educator. Now? I just don't know—ask me again next year. □



# Be Ready for the Surprise...

An interview with **Craig Knudsen, Deron Higgins, Casey Finley, and Gina Vildibill**  
Ministry staff, Community Covenant Church, El Cajon, California.

COMMUNITY COVENANT CHURCH'S (CCC) ministry staff has been and continues to be involved in the aftermath of the Santana and Granite Hills shootings. Noel Becchetti talked with the staff about their experience and thoughts on how other churches can respond and minister in response to youth violence.

Craig Knudsen has been senior pastor at CCC for nine years and a member since the church's founding in 1981. Prior to becoming CCC's pastor, Craig taught biology at El Cajon Valley High School. Deron Higgins is CCC's associate pastor. His ministry experience includes several years as president of San Diego County Youth for Christ. Casey Finley is CCC's senior-high pastor and a part-time campus supervisor at Granite Hills. Gina Vildibill pastors middle-school students at CCC.

**Noel Becchetti:** The unfortunate truth is that other churches and church staffs could face what you have gone through at Santana and Granite Hills. What thoughts and suggestions would you have for them given your recent experience?



**Craig Knudsen:** My first recommendation is, be ready for the surprise. With what's going on in our culture, we've got to anticipate that these kinds of atrocities could happen in our back yard. We need to think through ahead of time, how will we respond?

**Casey Finley:** It's not unlike teen suicides. There can be warning signs, but they can be hard to identify. It's a similar kind of self-destructiveness with the added evil of a kid wanting to take others with him- or herself.

**Becchetti:** In terms of the immediate reaction and response to this kind of incident, what should people be aware of and prepared for?

**Deron Higgins:** You want to be prepared for the media-circus aspect. The first thing I noticed when I got to Santana was all of the TV satellite trucks and media helicopters. It's seductive—some of the kids and adults I observed at that time were really getting into being interviewed and having their fifteen minutes of fame. It's almost an "I'm the story!" reaction, and the real story—the horror of kids killing other kids—becomes trivialized.

**Gina Vildibill:** There were a lot of people, including ministers, who showed up the first days of each incident that really didn't belong there and didn't have anything to offer. It seemed that they were there for the excitement and attention. The second and third days, the numbers dropped significantly—and the ministers and others who had a real reason to be there could be much more effective.



**Knudsen:** Another thing to be prepared for is what I call the "secular help." This certainly wasn't everyone, but many of the personnel from the traditional social-service agencies set up shop and essentially said, "O.K., we're the experts here." They looked at us ministers and basically marginalized us. What did we know? We weren't the experts.

**Becchetti:** We are still early on in the process, but what elements are important for the long-term ministry to happen?



**Finley:** It's really pretty simple—kids need to be with friends and caring adults, people who they know really cares about them. It's about listening. Ask good questions. Just being a reassuring, comforting presence is huge. If there are opportunities to share your faith,

take them, but gently, and try to resist the temptation to make a lot of spiritual conquests because kids are upset. They usually won't take.

**Higgins:** It's similar to grief counseling after a death—give people permission to keep talking about their feelings and processing well after the event. Don't presume that the kids will get over the trauma in a few weeks or months. Follow up, follow up, follow up.



**Becchetti:** While there may be no magic wands we can wave at the problem of youth violence, what are some things the church can do to possibly head these disasters off before they occur?

**Knudsen:** There are three things we can and need to do right away. First, we need alert and savvy parents. They need to be aware of the issues their kids are dealing with and the potential for how kids can act out their pain and anger. It's not something most parents like to hear, because we could very well be talking about their own children. But we've got to face it.

Second, we need a greater investment in our local-church youth ministries. We need to fund more staff and we need a greater investment in adult volunteers. I can't stress this enough—if we had even a one-to-one ratio of adults and kids in youth ministry, that would be great!

Third, we need to train our student leaders. How can they be the most effective friends with their peers? How can they reach out to the unlovely kids, as well as the attractive kids? How can they be alert for potential messages other kids may be sending regarding a possible outburst?

**Finley:** We need to take kids' statements seriously. It's a fine line between being diligent and being paranoid, but we need to listen without automatically stereotyping the at-risk kids. A lot of kids are in real pain and very frustrated, and they want to be heard. Unfortunately, some will go to horribly destructive lengths to achieve that.

**Higgins:** What it comes down to is that kids need to know that they really matter—that they have real worth and value. That's especially true for the kids who struggle with social skills, appearance, or who may lack the "in" attributes.

**Vildibill:** This is where the church can [make a] huge [impact]. Believe it or not, we have more of a built-in authority in our communities than we may realize. When adults and kids in the community see us on campus, getting involved, reaching out to kids, communicating with parents, just living our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, it will absolutely have an impact. □