

Violence prevention work gives tools, understanding

Since 1991, hundreds of people and organizations have worked in the Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County to develop and implement violence prevention tools and strategies in our media, workplaces, schools and faith communities. What we have learned through the initiative may be of relevance as we try to understand what happened last week at Red Lake High School, and how we can take steps to prevent such tragedies from occurring again.



**DONALD
GAULT**

In our initiative we utilize two definitions of violence: Violence is words and actions where the intent or impact is to hurt people. Violence is the misuse of power and authority.

These definitions describe violence as a continuum of behaviors.

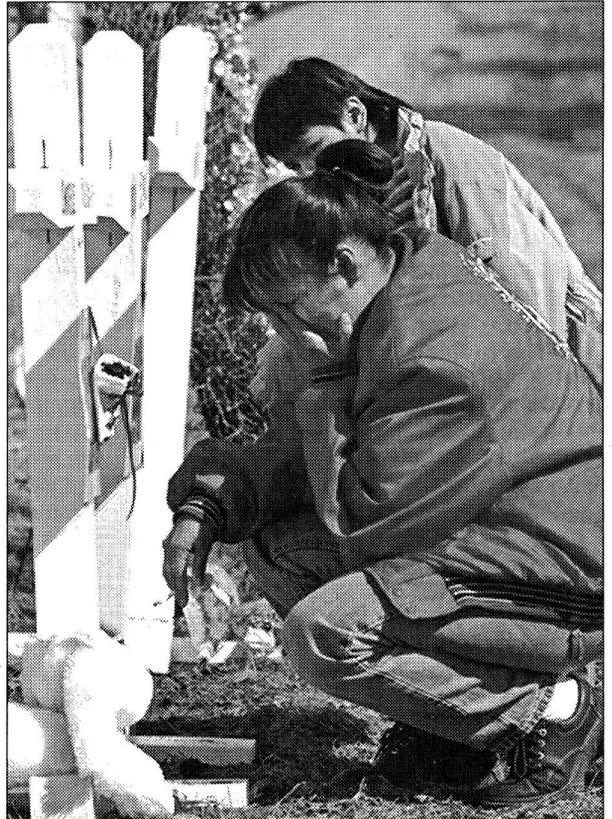
Clearly the actions of a 16-year-old child, Jeff Weise, were violent. But we must also look at what his previous experience had been. Early reports indicate that in his short life he experienced enormous tragedy and poverty. In the words of a number of students, he had been "terrorized" because of his "different" appearance, attitudes and beliefs. While there is never, ever justification for what he did, we must all recognize the impact of hurtful words and actions on children. To prevent violence we must look at and respond to violence in all its forms, including uncaring words from classmates and peers, as well as the overarching community and social violence of poverty and racism.

Rollo May, the writer and psychologist, said: "Deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant...violence arises not out of power, but out of powerlessness."

I believe we will never succeed in finding a motive for Weise's actions at Red Lake High School. If he were alive today I seriously doubt he could articulate one. How can anyone provide a rational explanation for so horrific an act? However, if violence is a misuse of power that arises out of a sense of powerlessness, then Weise's actions, while never to be condoned, do begin to become more predictable, and therefore more preventable.

Dr. James Garbarino of the Cornell University School of Human Ecology says, "All people have three fundamental needs: stability, security and affirmation." As we piece together the tragedies Weise experienced in his life, it appears these fundamental factors were in short supply. Garbarino's research finds that when these needs are not met, especially in the lives of young boys and men, people are prone to acting out violently.

In most news accounts of the tragedy at Red Lake, Weise is referred to as "the shooter." This is an easy way for us, "the good people," to distance ourselves from him, "the bad person." Looking at the photographs of Jeff Weise as a young boy, I am filled with as much sadness as I am as I try to grasp the tragedy that has befallen so many people and families as a result of his actions last week.



ANN HEISENFELT, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sandra Rosebear cries at a makeshift memorial outside Red Lake High School on Friday. Her daughter Chanelle was killed in the shootings at the school on Monday.

Gandhi said, "You must be the change that you seek in the world."

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "The real problem of our existence lies in the fact that we ought to love one another but do not."

We can assign blame and vilify Weise for the terrible harm he has done. Or we can choose to be the change we seek, to truly learn to love and care for one another, to assure that all of our children experience stability, security and affirmation in their lives for their own well-being as well as for all children and people in our communities.

Finally, adults must take responsibility to assure that young people do not have access to guns. The one common denominator in every school shooting is that they all have been shootings. Regardless of our beliefs about why people resort to violence and regardless of our beliefs regarding rights to gun ownership, we must all agree that controlling children's access to guns is the responsibility of adults, and we must accept and act on that responsibility in memory of all of the people whose lives have been so terribly changed forever.

Gault is manager of the Healthy Communities Section for the Ramsey County Public Health Department.