



Northern Ill. University: Was the Killer Crazy, or the Campus Hopeless?

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Posted on February 16, 2008, Printed on February 16, 2008

<http://www.alternet.org/story/77226/>

Unlike Virginia Tech gunman Cho Seung-Hui -- a sullen misfit who could barely look anyone in the eye, much less carry on a conversation -- Kazmierczak appeared to fit in just fine. -- Deanna Bellendi, Associated Press

Why? Why did this rage massacre at Northern Illinois University happen? Why did Steven Kazmierczak, "armed with three handguns and a brand-new pump-action shotgun he had carried onto campus in a guitar case," step from behind a screen on the stage of a lecture hall at NIU and open fire on a geology class, killing seven, wounding many more?

The explanations are a repeat of the ones we hear after every other massacre, leading nowhere: gun crazy, evil perp (Nazi, anti-Semite), didn't take his meds, broke up with girlfriend ... none of them are satisfying, none of them lead us anywhere except away from genuine examination.

In my book *Going Postal* I proposed looking at these uniquely American and uniquely post-Reagan massacres without cheap moral blinders. Look at the setting of the crime, look at the people who live in that setting, and look at the genealogy of the crime.

These rage massacres began in the mid-1980s in post offices, one after another, all seemingly "senseless." Mass killings like the one in Edmond, Oklahoma postal massacre in 1986 which left 14 dead, were quickly transformed into water cooler joke material: The phrase "going postal" replaced "having a cow," and the clash between the *Happy Days*-era world of mailmen and dawning age of rampaging maniacs was too silly, and seemingly safely confined, to be spared this transformation into cheap black comedy.

But by the end of the 1980s, the water cooler crowd started getting shot as well: workplace massacres spread like a nasty virus from the postal service to wider private sector, and they haven't stopped. The jokes got more nervous. Workplaces transformed into little Atticas, with surveillance cameras, badges, armed rent-a-cops, along with snitches and mutual suspicion.

But the jokes about "going postal" didn't really end until rage massacres spread to the next logical place in Middle American life: our middle-class schools. Suddenly horror and revulsion overwhelmed the irony. Privately, in the safe anonymous world of the Internet, the Columbine killers have become heroes to untold numbers of America's kids, just as they'd set out to do. Like so many terrorists and insurgents, Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold set out on a suicide mission to "kickstart a revolution." And like many successful terrorist or insurgency movements, they succeeded by spawning an ever-growing supply of schoolyard killers.

Over the past few years, the killings leapt from the K-12 schools to universities. Not the top universities, which seems significant to me, but rather to obviously-second-rate universities, as well as the third-rate "vocational" schools. This is relevant, because in a culture so obsessed with being number one, and where the socioeconomic gap between the Number Ones and Everyone Else is growing so wide that it's starting to take on medieval dimensions, it's the ones stuck in the vast middle who face real existential terror.

We're just starting to learn a bit about the NIU killer, 27-year-old Steven P. Kazmierczak: he's been described as a "fairly normal, unstressed person," as well as a bright honors student. Before there was a photo and a name, he was described as a "skinny white guy" wearing all black and a ski mask. In other words, a caricature of evil. Now, one look at the photo of the pimply, pinheaded, goggle-eyed Kazmierczak, and it's hard to match the evil to the recognizably twerpy, sympathetic face.

A Northern Illinois law student told the *Washington Post*, "The person who did it is a loser. He doesn't deserve a name or picture reference. You're not Kurt Cobain if you do that."

Let's assume he's at least partly right: Kazmierczak probably was a loser, by the standards of Midwestern American winners. For now there's too little information to sort out. But judging from previous massacres, it's likely that Kazmierczak reached a point where life no longer was worth living. His medications are now being held up as a cause, but they just as easily could have been the effects of living the life he lived.

While most of the media focuses on the healing Christian spirit of Dekalb, Ill., home of Northern Illinois University, I've done some searching of what students wrote in anonymous forums, particularly studentsreviews.com, about NIU and Dekalb. Not what they're saying now, when the cameras are on and everyone's officially grieving and Wondering Why, but from last year to three years ago, when they were honest. What you find is an enormous amount of anger and regret -- the sort of regret you'd expect from a middle-aged Willy

Loman looking back on a wasted life.

"NIU is a glorified community college," writes one former student. "Let's just say there aren't many Albert Einsteins on campus. If you got solid C's in high school and otherwise are destined for a career path that involves shoveling shit, then NIU is the right school for you. If you are a gang banger from the inner city who has just enough smarts to con a subsidized college education out of the system, then NIU is the right school for you. If your greatest career ambition is to one day be the assistant manager at GNC or Radio Shack, then NIU is the right school for you. If your dream mobile involves one day owning an eleven year old minivan with half the trim missing, then NIU is the right school for you. If you think Pabst Blue Ribbon is a "high end" beer, then NIU is the right school for you. If you like following a football program that hasn't been to a bowl game since 1983, then NIU is the right school for you. If you like following a basketball program that is lucky to draw 1,200 fans to a home game, then NIU is the right school for you. If you like going to a school that ranks as one of the butt ugliest campuses on planet earth, then NIU is the right school for you."

The physical ugliness and intellectual mediocrity are a recurring theme:

"NIU is the pits. It's a suitcase school with a horribly ugly campus that ought to re-label itself Northern Illinois Community College."

"The academic rigor required to do well at NIU is a joke Best advice to any high school students considering NIU? Do everything in your power to get yourself into a better school like U of I, Illinois State or some other well regarded public or private school And don't even get me started on the NIU campus. If there is an uglier or more disorganized one on this planet, I haven't seen it in all my travels. There are rundown CHA buildings in the most blighted parts of Chicago that are in better shape than the NIU dorm complex. Outside of Barsema Hall and a few others, the rest of the other buildings are dreadful and embarrassing. The first thing 95% of NIU students do upon receiving their diploma is to run like hell from DeKalb and never turn back."

DeKalb is a small farming town full of cornfields; its population is 40,000, while NIU has roughly 25,000 students. Both town and school are overwhelmingly white. One student described the town this way: "[A]llergies are bad because of the cornfields, and it smells in the summer because of the PIG FARM!! Also, people in the area are generally not very nice."

Speaking of not very nice people, DeKalb's most famous son is Joseph F. Glidden, was the inventor of barbed wire. The university's most famous living graduates, are Dan Castellana, the voice actor

for Homer Simpson, and slimeball Republican Dennis Hastert, who famously declared after Katrina that certain "neighborhoods" [read: black and poor] should be "bulldozed" rather than rebuilt. So there you have it: DeKalb's most celebrated citizens are a pair of creeps and and the voiceman for the epitomal American loser.

As one woman from NIU's class of 2006 shows, it's really the people who make life there a living Hell [I'm including her grammar mistakes]:

"[D]on't make the same mistake I did, NIU is a terrible school a complete waste of my time and money. I came into NIU as a transfer student despite the fact that i had several friends that told me how horrible it was. WEll they were right!! First of all the students here are completely self centered and ignorant. Not a friendly campus AT All. everyone stays in there own cliques and groups even out at the bars, dont expect anyone to be friendly to you. Apartment and house parties are closed here usually just groups of friends. The faculty here are extremely unhelpful and unwilling to help you. The financial aid and other administrative offices treat you like shit, not to mention their "offices" look like prison cells. Coming from a school which had everything remodeled it was very hard coming here. This school looks ilek it hasnt been remodeled since 1800. ALl the buildings (except Barsema) are disgusting SICK i wouldn't be surprised if huge rats were crawling around. The on campus dorms and dining facilities I will not even get into that if you unfortunately decide to invest your time into an education here you will find out BEWARE!! THE library is terrible, I had a better library at my grade school. The gym: I have a better gym in the basement of my house. It looks liek a bunch of treadmills thrown into a basement. This is a suitcase school. 70% of students leave for the weekends. WARNING: Massive amounts of drug consumption at this school. Extremely high drug scene, so if you aren't into that you will have ahard time finding people like you. Dekalb is an awful, ugly town with nothign to do. There is no mall nearby. There are no places to work in town. NIU has been the worst experience of my life. I would give anything to go back and have listened to the 10-15 people who advised me not to go here. So here is your chance right now for anyone reading this, before you make the same mistake and regret it. Don't choose NIU!!! Invest your time, money, and college experience somewhere else."

It's not just the transfer students who grieve about the people in DeKalb, as one psychology major explains:

"I think NIU is the shittiest decision a person can make as far as picking a university that will broaden their horizons. I was very motivated with my studies before I moved out there and the lack of job opportunities doesn't give you a way to apply your studies so I've lost a lot of inspiration. It may be reasonably priced financially, but I was absolutely miserable so it wasn't worth saving the money. If you're planning on depending on your bike to commute around town good luck. It seems that people in Dekalb are unfamiliar with the invention of the bicycle. When I've ridden on the sidewalks I get harassed. When I ride on the street on one trip I have numerous people yelling obscenities at me to get out of the street. Last year when I was living in the dorms while My bike was chained to the bike rack somebody stole my entire front wheel. I got it fixed this year and within two weeks of the repair while I was in class somebody seemingly attacked my bike (the front wheel's rim was bent and tire was flat.) I don't understand why anyone would do something so pointless, but it seems that's how a lot of people in Dekalb are. I managed to make a few close friends but the majority of the people in Dekalb are insensitive, uninspired (with reason considering their surroundings), and pretentious even though they have no reason to be cause a lot of them are very lucky to have even gotten into NIU. Even if you're motivated and don't have trouble finding a job where you're from, it's very hard to find a decent job in Dekalb. Almost everything is minimum wage. I was making \$11 an hour before I transferred to NIU and then the best I could find was a job at a gas station making \$6.50/hr. The only way for you to get experience in your field is through volunteer experience because there are very very few decent jobs in the surrounding area. This is going to sound ridiculous but the weather is seriously always worse in Dekalb than anywhere else. I'm from the south [Chicago] burbs and when I take the hour and half drive to Dekalb it's always storming harder, snowing more, more humid in the summer or the wind is much more extreme. Dekalb is always very windy though probably because of all the farm land and lack of trees breaking the wind. Whatever it's from, NIU is like a wind tunnel. The majority of my professors are also insensitive and don't understand unusual family situations. The campus is ok in some parts but hideous in most areas and it doesn't have a lot of natural beauty. The most scenic part of campus the main entrance by the lagoon is ruined by ugly looking satellites scattered about. I could go on forever. I attended for a year and a half an now i'm transferring. I had a bad feeling about the campus from the start when I visited and I guess

I should have gone with it. I'm just trying to keep other people from making the same mistake."

If you're wondering why Kazmierczak transferred out of NIU to the University of Illinois-Champaign last spring, this might help explain it; if you're wondering, as many bloggers have, why he'd come back and shoot up NIU rather than his current university, these sentiments are at least worth considering.

Kazmierczak's hometown, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, is also revealing of the vast, flat middle of Middle America. Located on the edge of Chicago's hyper-busy O'Hare Airport, Elk Grove Village has a humble population of roughly 40,000 almost all-white middle-class citizens (mostly German and Polish stock), yet it hosts, as it proudly boasts, the largest consolidated business park in North America. Packed into its humble 5.4 square miles are 3,800 business, hosting over 100,000 workers servicing O'Hare Airport alone, and several Interstate highways servicing the wall-to-wall giant flat-roofed warehouse structures, corporate offices and, yes, suburban tract homes.

Two years ago, Kazmierczak's parents moved from Elk Grove Village to Florida, where his mother died of Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Scratching the surface of his life -- a very familiar, flat sort of American Hell -- makes his need for medications a bit more understandable, as is the case for the millions of Americans like him who take psychiatric medication. Indeed, someone who wouldn't turn to antidepressants would, in my opinion, be the sick one.

If we bracket his massacre as the work of an evil lunatic on drugs, we'll miss yet another opportunity to genuinely examine what life is like for most Americans today, who live in that terrifying gap between the official propaganda about a nation of happy fun-loving Number Ones, and the reality of mediocrity, petty malice, and a flat physical setting that reflects the malice and mediocrity of its town elders.

For more, read [Mark Ames' article on the Virginia Tech massacre](#).

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