

‘Are You a Christian?’ Oregon Gunman Reportedly Had Religious Motives

A gunman stalked onto an Oregon college campus on Thursday (Oct. 1) and opened fire, killing nine people and wounding seven before police shot him to death, authorities said, in yet another burst of U.S. gun violence that ranked as the deadliest this year.

The suspect, who witnesses say fired dozens of shots in a classroom full of screaming students, was slain in an exchange of gunfire with two police officers in Snyder Hall at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, ending the morning rampage.

The gunman was not publicly identified by local authorities. A law enforcement source named him as Chris Harper-Mercer. Other media said he was 26.

In a photo posted on a MySpace profile believed to be his, a young man with a shaved head and dark-rimmed eyeglasses is seen staring into the camera while holding a rifle.

CNN reported the suspect was armed with three handguns, a “long gun” and body armor. According to survivors, the gunman at one point ordered cowering students to stand up and state their religion before shooting them one by one.

Stacy Boylan, the father of an 18-year-old student who was wounded but survived by playing dead, told CNN his daughter recounted her professor being shot point blank as the assailant stormed into the classroom.

“He was able to stand there and start asking people one by one what their religion was,” Boylan said, relating the ordeal as described by his daughter. “‘Are you a Christian?’ he would

ask them. ... 'If you're a Christian, stand up. Good. Because you're a Christian, you're going to see God in just about one second,' and he shot and killed them. And he kept going down the line doing this to people."

Another student, Kortney Moore, 18, who was present in the writing class when the gunman entered and survived unhurt, gave a similar account to the local *News Review* newspaper.

Authorities offered no explanation for the gunman's actions.

"The law enforcement investigation into the shooter and into his motivations is ongoing," Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin said at an afternoon news conference. He also said three of the wounded victims were hospitalized in critical condition.

Hanlin refused to name the gunman. "I will not give him the credit he probably sought via his horrific and cowardly act," he told reporters.

In an Internet posting on the Spiritual Passions dating and social networking site, a user posted a picture that appears to be Harper-Mercer under the user name IRONCROSS45, a handle Harper-Mercer used as his email.

He described himself on the site as a 26-year-old, mixed-race "man looking for a woman." He said he was "not religious, but spiritual," and was a "teetotaler" living with his parents and a conservative Republican. Socially, he said, he was "shy at first" and "better in small groups." He described himself as "always dieting" and looking for "the yin to my yang."

The same email address linked to a Chris Harper-Mercer was also associated with the profile of user Lithium_Love on a torrent sharing website.

The user wrote a blog post on the site about Vester Flanagan, the man who shot dead two reporters during a live broadcast in

August before killing himself, calling the footage of the shooting “good.”

“On an interesting note, I have noticed that so many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are. A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. Seems the more people you kill, the more you’re in the limelight,” the post said.

The user’s last torrent upload was on Tuesday and was entitled “This World Surviving Sandy Hook BBC Documentary 2015,” according to the website.

The massacre in Roseburg, a former timber town on the western edge of the Cascades some 260 miles (420 km) south of Portland, was the latest in a flurry of lethal U.S. mass shootings in recent years.

Thursday’s was the deadliest this year, surpassing the nine killed in a gun battle between motorcycle gangs in Waco, Texas, in May, and the nine who died in the rampage of a gunman at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina in June.

Not counting Thursday’s incident, 293 mass shootings have been reported this year, according to the Mass Shooting Tracker website, a crowd-sourced database kept by anti-gun activists that logs events in which four or more people are shot.

The violence has fueled demands for more gun control in the United States, where ownership of firearms is protected by the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and better care for the mentally ill.

President Barack Obama, speaking just hours after the rampage, said the mass killings should move Americans to demand greater

gun controls from elected officials.

"Somehow this has become routine," a visibly angry Obama said. "The reporting is routine. My response here, at this podium, ends up being routine. ... We've become numb to this."

For students at Umpqua College and the town of Roseburg, Thursday's violence was anything but routine.

Freshman Kenny Ungerman told NBC he saw the shooter, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, carrying a handgun as he went into the building, followed by gunshots and screams. Student Cassandra Welding told CNN that she heard 35 to 40 shots.

Student Brady Winder, in a posting on Facebook, said he was in a classroom next door and ran when he heard the gunfire.

"I ran to the edge of the campus, down a hill and waited. From talking with a student in the classroom where it happen, almost every person in the room was shot by a man with four guns," Winder, 23, wrote.

Survivors were transported to a local fairground by bus, and some family members were left waiting for hours to see if their loved ones would be among them.

"We have grief counselors waiting for those parents who have no children getting off that bus," said the college's president, Rita Calvin.

State and federal authorities swarmed over Roseburg, with police descending on an apartment of the presumed suspect about 2 miles (3 km) from campus, where neighbors said they recognized him from photos posted on social media, but they had little to say about him.

A man identifying himself as Ian Mercer, the gunman's father, spoke briefly to a throng of media outside his home in Los Angeles Thursday night.

"It's been a devastating day, devastating for me and my family," he said, according to a transcript of his remarks provided by local broadcaster KNBC-TV.

Umpqua Community College, which began its fall term this week and serves more than 13,000 students—3,000 of them enrolled full time—said it would be closed until Monday.

At nightfall, scores of people attended a candlelight vigil at a municipal park, where a lone trumpeter played strains of "Amazing Grace."

The Roseburg shooting ranks among the bloodiest on U.S. school campuses, which have become frequent targets for such violence.

It was the deadliest at an institution of higher education since April 2007, when a student at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg killed 32 people and wounded 25 before taking his own life. {eo}

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