

Nathaniel Brazill: A Profile

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THE ATTACK

26 May 2000 was the last day of school for thirteen-year-old Nathaniel Brazill. He and a friend (Michelle Cordovaz) were goofing around with water balloons and got suspended by Kevin Hinds, a school counselor.¹ Hinds escorted the two students out of school. As he did so, Brazill asked him what time he would be leaving for the day. Hinds told him, and Brazill and Cordovaz walked off.

On his way home, Brazill told Cordovaz that he had a gun and was going to kill Hinds: “Watch. I’m going to be all over the news.”² He subsequently asked another friend if he had a gun and the friend asked why Brazill wanted one. Brazill told him he was “going to fuck up the school.”³ This suggested that he perhaps was planning to do more than shoot Kevin Hinds.

Brazill eventually got home and retrieved the gun he had recently stolen from the man he referred to as his grandfather, though the man (Elmore McCray) reportedly was the father of Brazill’s godmother.⁴ Brazill returned to the school and entered the building. He did not, however, seek out Kevin Hinds. The court report contains the following account of Brazill’s actions:

Once inside the school, Brazill went directly to Barry Grunow’s classroom to speak with two friends, Dinora Rosales and Vonae Ware. He had once dated Ware for a time, and was romantically interested in Rosales. Earlier in the day, Brazill gave Rosales two cards and a bouquet of flowers.

When Brazill knocked on Grunow’s door, the students in the class were already standing, because they were about to go outside. Brazill sternly asked to speak to Rosales and Ware, who were standing on either side of Grunow. The teacher did not allow the girls to leave the classroom, but said that Brazill could come inside.

Brazill refused to enter the classroom. Three more times he asked to see the girls. Each time Grunow calmly declined and told him to go back to class.

Brazill then pulled out the gun and aimed it at Grunow’s head. He was in the hallway, approximately an arm’s length from Grunow. He backed up slightly and assumed a shooter’s stance with his legs apart.

Grunow told Brazill to stop pointing the gun, but he continued to point the gun at the teacher’s head. Brazill appeared to be angry but calm; he was not crying or shaking. Brazill pulled the slide back on the gun.

As Grunow attempted to close the classroom door, Brazill pulled the trigger and Grunow fell to the floor, with a gunshot wound between the eyes.⁵

Brazill then fled the scene, but on his way out aimed his gun

NATHANIEL BRAZILL

Date: **26 May 2000**

School: **Lake Worth Middle School**

Location: **Lake Worth, FL**

Age: **13**

Killed: **1**

Wounded: **0**

Outcome: **Ran; surrendered; prison**

Shooter population: **Secondary school**

Psychological type: **Traumatized**

Attack type: **Targeted individuals**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see “About the Site” at schoolshooters.info.

at a teacher and warned him to leave him alone. The teacher turned around and led his students back to the classroom for safety. Brazill left the school and was found nearby by a police officer who happened to be in the area. Brazill confessed to shooting someone and was arrested.

BRAZILL'S UPBRINGING

Prior to his attack, Brazill appeared to be destined for success. He was a bright boy who was in the school band, played chess, and was seen as a fun-loving kid, even a prankster.⁶ He aspired to be a lawyer, be a police officer, or have a military career and perhaps “fly Air Force One for the President.”⁷ He was generally liked by his teachers and was voted Student of the Month in December 1999, just a few months before he committed murder.

Though he was well liked and high-spirited, there was a dark side to his home life. His mother, Polly Powell, did not have long-lasting or stable relationships with men. She gave birth to Nathaniel at age 21; the father was Nathaniel Brazill, Sr. Though they were never married, Mr. Brazill paid child support.⁸ Father and son stayed in touch to some extent, though Mr. Brazill ended up living three hours away from his son: “Nate continued to visit his father, but Nate Sr. admits, ‘We were not as close as I would have liked to have been.’”⁹

When Nathaniel, Jr., was three years old, his mother married Wainford Whitefield, who turned out to be a violent man:

One night, Polly called the police from a pay phone, telling the dispatcher that Whitefield had threatened her with a knife. When police arrived, he was gone, but her face was swollen from where he’d punched her. Another night, Whitefield pushed her onto the kitchen floor and hit her again. She finally received a restraining order against him, forbidding him to come in or near the house.¹⁰

Ms. Powell called the police multiple times in response to the abuse and fear she suffered at the hands of Mr. Whitefield. This went on for four years, until they separated in 1996 and divorced in 1997.

Also in 1997, Ms. Powell had a daughter, Ebony. The father was Marshall Powell, whom she married in 1999. Brazill reportedly reacted badly to having a sister. As his mother stated, “It was just me and him for eleven and a half years.”¹¹ Another stress on the family was that in 1999 Ms. Powell was diagnosed with breast cancer. In fact, “Ms. Powell married her latest husband the same month she told her son she had breast cancer. Then his grades began to drop.”¹² Additional distress occurred after Ms. Powell’s surgery: “she fell and ripped her stitches and as the blood was pouring out on to the carpet, she screamed yet again, ‘call 911!’”¹³

Details about how bad things were at home are elusive. On one hand, Nathaniel said he was never abused and his mother claimed, “He never saw it because I would make sure he was out of the house.”¹⁴ Elsewhere, however, it was reported that his

mother “had been in and out of abusive relationships since he was a young boy. At times, he was forced to jump in to break up fights between his mother and one stepfather.”¹⁵ Another reporter wrote that Brazill “was surrounded by domestic abuse and alcoholism at home.”¹⁶ In addition, “Police reported that there were 17 domestic incident reports at her [Ms. Powell’s] home in the six years prior to the shooting.”¹⁷ One of Ms. Powell’s partners reportedly “demanded that Nathaniel move out of the house.”¹⁸ Another article stated that one of Brazill’s stepfathers “refused to let him live with the family, so he would spend days with his mother but at night be sent to his grandmother’s house to sleep.”¹⁹

Despite her statement that Brazill never witnessed the domestic violence, during the trial Ms. Powell said, “I just want everyone to know that what happened in my past is what brought Nathaniel here.”²⁰ In the course of the trial, Brazill’s defense attorneys “showed the 13-year-old often saw his mother subjected to violence at the hands of her former husbands and boyfriends.”²¹

In fact, defense attorney Robert Udell dug deeply in the family history, working hard to get past the family’s reluctance to reveal unpleasant details. According to Udell, the family had two generations of alcoholism, including Brazill’s paternal grandfather and an uncle, both of whom died of cirrhosis of the liver.²² In addition, Brazill reported “seeing his mother drunk and throwing up.”²³

In fact, the home life was so unstable that “for several years between the ages of four and nine, Nathaniel lived intermittently with his grandmother.”²⁴ Udell also uncovered more details about the violence in the home. At one point when Ms. Powell broke up with a boyfriend, Brazill begged her not to hurt him; when she broke up with Mr. Whitefield, Brazill begged him not to hurt his mother.²⁵ Thus, it appears Brazill witnessed his mother as both perpetrator and victim of violence.

Though it had been reported that Brazill was not the target of violence in the home, on one occasion, Mr. Whitefield “pushed Nathaniel up against the wall and had his hands around his neck.”²⁶ In response to this, Ms. Powell said, “I started hitting him [Mr. Whitefield] with my fists. I couldn’t stop. Maybe I didn’t want to.”²⁷ In addition, in a list of things that really upset him, Brazill wrote, “I hate when people put their hands on me.”²⁸ Thus, even if the primary fights were between his mother and the men in her life, it appears that at least on some occasions, Brazill was a victim.

In January 2000, the relationship between Polly and Marshall Powell ended. Things had been so bad between them that “Polly had to call the police to stand by while he moved his personal belongings out of the house.”²⁹

Ms. Powell acknowledged that she had grown up “around guns.” When asked if she had ever pointed a gun at someone, she acknowledged that she had. When asked if she had ever pulled the trigger, she said, “Maybe.”³⁰ Thus, in addition to physical violence, Brazill may have witnessed guns being pointed at people and perhaps being fired.

WHY SHOOT MR. GRUNOW?

Mr. Grunow was a popular teacher, and one whom Brazill particularly liked. In fact, it was Mr. Grunow who had nominated Brazill for Student of the Month. Why did Brazill end up shooting someone he claimed was his favorite teacher?³¹ A telling episode with another teacher (Mr. Packard) seems to shed light on the dynamics of the murder:

Nate and another student got into a squabble in Packard's class over a bottle of Fruitopia. Some of the purple stuff spilled on the floor. "So you think, What would King Solomon do?" Packard says. "I took it away from them altogether."

Nate stood up, glared into Packard's eyes. "Give me back my drink," he said.

Packard refused.

"He said it again, only louder and in a real threatening tone: 'Give me back my drink!'" Packard recalls. And he kept saying it, "Give me back my drink," and it was like he was demanding it back."³²

Later that day, Brazill returned to Packard's class and took a bunch of pens and pencils from a cup on Packard's desk. Packard asked what he was doing and Brazill said, "You took my drink, so I'll take all your pencils."³³ Brazill then threw the pens and pencils in a trash can. Packard reported, "All I can think is that he didn't want to be shown up."³⁴ Brazill's anger over this episode reportedly lasted for weeks.

On 26 May, Brazill tried to get Mr. Grunow to let two girls out of class to talk with him. When Grunow refused, Brazill apparently felt "shown up" again. This may have been a public humiliation for him, despite the fact that Grunow said Brazill could talk to the girls in the classroom. Why did Brazill refuse this opportunity?

Perhaps because he had a crush on one of the girls and needed to talk to her privately. The girl, Dinora, reportedly was good friends with Brazill but was not romantically interested in him.³⁵ According to one source, six days before the attack Dinora had kissed him (reportedly his first kiss). This, however, was done during a game of "Truth or Dare," so perhaps Dinora simply did it as part of the game, not because of any feelings she had for him. Despite this, Brazill said "this was the best day of my whole life."³⁶ Another source, however, said that Brazill tried to kiss her but she "gently pushed him away."³⁷

Though one article said Dinora did not return Brazill's feelings, the two of them reportedly exchanged "love notes" in class.³⁸ Perhaps she had some feelings, but then something had changed. Brazill said, "Dinora was going out with Nicholas and had dropped me."³⁹ Brazill, however, apparently had not given up on Dinora, and on the morning of 26 May, he had presented her with three bouquets of flowers and a heart-shaped balloon. She reportedly gave Brazill a kiss on the cheek.⁴⁰

Because 26 May was the last day of school, Brazill appar-

ently felt a sense of urgency to talk to Dinora before the day ended and they might not see each other again until the fall. Her family was very strict and would not allow "boys to visit, call, or even send notes."⁴¹ Thus, not only did Brazill perhaps feel "shown up" by Grunow, but he presumably saw him as standing between him and the girl he loved and desperately needed to talk to and whom he might not see again for three months. Keeping in mind that Brazill had said he was going to kill Kevin Hinds, perhaps he realized that the attack would end with him either dead or in jail. This could explain the urgency with which he tried to see Dinora. In his mind, perhaps he knew that he would never have another chance.

After the attack, a piece of writing was found in Brazill's bedroom. It mentioned being picked on and having suicidal thoughts, and said that teachers tried to drown him in a water park. It even said that Dinora stabbed him in the neck with a pencil. In court, however, Brazill said that none of it was true and that the whole thing was a joke.⁴² Given his sense of humor, this seems possible, but it wasn't the only time he talked about suicide. Prior to his attack, he reportedly said he was going to kill himself because Dinora liked someone else. What is odd about this is that his alleged method of suicide was to swallow chewing gum. His friends didn't know if this was another of his pranks or if behind the apparent comedy there were real suicidal thoughts.⁴³

NATHANIEL BRAZILL: A TRAUMATIZED SCHOOL SHOOTER

Brazill's life resembles those of other traumatized shooters (see my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*). Common features include a family history of alcoholism, domestic violence, physical abuse, changing caregivers, and a distant relationship with his father. In addition, there may have been inappropriate or illegal firearm use; his mother was not forthcoming with details, but admitted pointing a gun at someone and implied she had shot at somebody (whether or not she hit him, assuming she did shoot, remains unknown). Illegal firearm use has occurred in the families of multiple traumatized school shooters. (It is possible, of course, that if Ms. Powell did shoot someone, it could have been in self-defense, and thus not a misuse of a gun.)

Brazill also resembles many school shooters in other ways. First, he had asthma, which prevented him from playing sports.⁴⁴ Medical problems and biological challenges to one's masculinity have been found in many shooters. In addition, perhaps in response to their biological issues, many shooters have aspired to serve in the military or law enforcement; perhaps they viewed this as a way to establish a strong male identity for themselves. Brazill had dreams of being both a police officer and a soldier. In addition, like many school shooters, Brazill had at least one family member in the military (an uncle), perhaps serving as a role model for him (Brazill said he got the gun "with

the idea of asking his military uncle to teach him to shoot it”⁴⁵).

As with other shooters, there were additional stressors, such as declining academic performance (including some failing grades) and romantic rejection. On top of this, after being an only child for most of his life, he suddenly had a new baby sister and a new stepfather, and around the same time, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. He may have feared for her life; in fact, she died at age 43 in 2008.⁴⁶ In addition, his stepfather, Marshall Powell, who had moved out under the supervision of the police, had moved back into the home just “a few weeks before the murder.”⁴⁷ His return may have been one more stress that pushed Brazill to his limit. As summed up by his attorney: “We know that despite appearances at school, he feared death, witnessed violence, and was rejected at home. Nathaniel was in a crumbling world.”⁴⁸

The combination of the history of violence at home with more recent stresses, resulted in murder. In the same way that the Fruitopia incident with Mr. Packard appears to have been a public humiliation for Brazill, being suspended by Kevin Hinds on the last day of school may have been another such humiliation. In addition, Mr. Grunow stood between him and the girl he loved. Not only did this prevent him from delivering whatever message he intended for Dinora, but it likely was experienced as yet another public humiliation. Being a victim and a witness of violence are disempowering experiences. His run-ins with Packard, Hinds, and Grunow were also disempowering experiences. Apparently the accumulated rage from his life history and his desperation to see Dinora caused an action he has regretted ever since. While in prison, Brazill said, “What was I thinking? I was carrying a gun. I guess it made me feel big and powerful.”⁴⁹

NOTES

- 1 *Brazill v. Florida*, 2003, p. 1. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 2 *Brazill v. Florida*, p. 1.
- 3 *Brazill v. Florida*, p. 2.
- 4 *Grunow v. Valor Corporation of Florida*, p. 6. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 5 *Brazill v. Florida*, p. 2.
- 6 Bob Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.” *New Times* (Broward/Palm Beach), 29 June 2000.
- 7 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 8 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 9 Jeff Goodell, “Nathaniel Brazill’s Last Day of School,” *Rolling Stone*, 26 October 2000.

- 10 Goodell, “Nathaniel Brazill’s Last Day of School.”
- 11 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 12 Dana Canedy, “Boy Who Killed a Teacher Gets 28 Years and No Parole.” *New York Times*, 28 July 2001.
- 13 Robert Udell, Robin Shellow, and Malcolm Young, “Looking Backwards: A Sentencing Report on Behalf of Nathaniel Brazill,” p. 8. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 14 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 15 Canedy, “Boy Who Killed a Teacher.”
- 16 Tim Roche, “Nate Brazill, Sentenced to Grow Up in Prison.” *Time*, 27 July 2001.
- 17 Kate Randall, “Another Florida Teenager Receives Harsh Adult Prison Sentence.” *World Socialist Web Site*, 3 August 2001.
- 18 Randall, “Another Florida Teenager.”
- 19 Canedy, “Boy Who Killed a Teacher.”
- 20 “Polly Powell, Mother of Nathaniel Brazill, Dies at 43.” *Palm Beach Post*, 27 July 2008.
- 21 “Polly Powell, Mother of Nathaniel Brazill, Dies at 43.”
- 22 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 3.
- 23 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 4.
- 24 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 3.
- 25 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 8.
- 26 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 6.
- 27 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 6.
- 28 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 8.
- 29 Goodell, “Nathaniel Brazill’s Last Day of School.”
- 30 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 7.
- 31 Roche, “Nate Brazill, Sentenced to Grow Up in Prison.”
- 32 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 33 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 34 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 35 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 36 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 5.
- 37 Goodell, “Nathaniel Brazill’s Last Day of School.”
- 38 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 5.
- 39 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 5.
- 40 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 41 Goodell, “Nathaniel Brazill’s Last Day of School.”
- 42 <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0105/08/se.02.html>
- 43 Norman, “The Kid Who Killed.”
- 44 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 3.
- 45 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 9.
- 46 “Polly Powell, Mother of Nathaniel Brazill, Dies at 43.”
- 47 Goodell, “Nathaniel Brazill’s Last Day of School.”
- 48 Udell et al., “Looking Backwards,” p. 5.
- 49 Roxanne Stein, “Nathaniel Brazill 11 Years Later,” WPTV, 12 September 2011.