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## Karl Pierson

### *“A Psychopath with a Superiority Complex”*

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I had a strange experience while researching this incident. As I waded through over two thousand pages of documents from the Arapahoe County Sheriff’s Office, I came across my own name in the law enforcement records. Karl Pierson had downloaded my book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* to a tablet. Though there is no way to know for sure that he read the book, he may have done so and thus been familiar with my typology of school shooters as being psychopathic, psychotic, or traumatized.

Besides giving me a bit of a shock, is there any significance to this? Perhaps. On the day that he began his journal, Pierson wrote, “I am a psychopath with a superiority complex.”<sup>1</sup> Though self-diagnoses are not necessarily accurate, in this case, Pierson appears to have been correct. He also appears to have studied the matter. Besides my book, he had downloaded *Confessions of a Sociopath*, by M.E. Thomas, and borrowed from a library the book *Columbine: A True Crime Story*, by Jeffrey Kass. He apparently was familiar with the characteristics of sociopaths/psychopaths (the terms are often used interchangeably), presumably had read my analysis of Eric Harris as having had a psychopathic personality, and recognized himself in this description. In fact, a girl he knew at high school reported that Pierson had referred to himself as a sociopath,<sup>2</sup> and he also used this word to describe himself in his journal.<sup>3</sup>

Why do I think Pierson’s self-diagnosis as a psychopath was accurate? The primary impetus for the attack was his rage against his debate team coach, Mr. Tracy Murphy, for being demoted from team captain due to his inappropriate behavior. How does someone justify murder in response to demotion on a high school debate team? A psychopath with a superiority complex considers himself an exalted being. In fact, Pierson’s profile name on his computer was “Grand exalted leader,”<sup>4</sup> and part of his Facebook URL was “Karl is boss.”<sup>5</sup> For such a person, it is as if he is a king and everyone else is a peasant. Thus, any insult or challenge to his view of himself is like a slap in the face by a social inferior. This cannot be tolerated. Thus, Mr. Murphy deserved to die.

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## KARL PIERSON

### *Perpetrator Dossier*

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Attack date	13 December 2013
Attack site	Arapahoe High School
Location	Centennial, Colorado, United States
Age at incident	18
Killed	1
Wounded	0
Outcome	Suicide
Shooter population	Secondary school
Psychological type	Psychopathic
Attack type	Targeted individuals

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Multiple aspects of psychopathy are embedded in this dynamic: a grandiose self-image, an acute sensitivity to put-downs, an inability to accept responsibility for the consequences of his own behavior, a preoccupation with perceived victimization, easily triggered rage, a rejection of morality or law as impediments to violence, and an absence of empathy.

### *Background Information*

According to one article, “To many of his neighbors, Colorado gunman Karl Pierson was the wholesome boy next door who liked achievement and ran on the cross country team.”<sup>6</sup> Another article stated, “Pierson was a dedicated, bright student from a religious family that attends Bible study meetings.”<sup>7</sup> He “was an Eagle Scout who built a garden for a nonprofit organization.”<sup>8</sup>

His mother “worked for the Douglas County School District.”<sup>9</sup> In 2008, she began teaching at Acres Green Elementary School: “Working with first-graders to sixth-graders, [Mrs.] Pierson spends three days a week going to different classrooms.” She worked on empowering the students: “The philosophy she uses is SOLE, for respect for self, others, learning and the environment.”<sup>10</sup>

Pierson’s parents divorced when he was a junior in high school,<sup>11</sup> and one person commented that he seemed to get angry following the divorce.<sup>12</sup> The parents reportedly began the divorce proceedings in late 2011, but the divorce was not finalized until August 2012.<sup>13</sup> Pierson lived with his mother; his father remained involved in his life, though Pierson had never been to his father’s apartment.<sup>14</sup> His sister, Kristen, was two grades behind him in school.<sup>15</sup> In 2011, she and Karl recited the pledge of allegiance together to open a session of the Colorado House of Representatives.<sup>16</sup> On 9 January 2013, Pierson got a job at McDonald’s and was employed there until his death; he was said to have been a good employee.<sup>17</sup>

In April 2013, Pierson “placed third in national extemporaneous speaking at the National Qualifying Tournament . . . earning him a spot in the national tournament in June.”<sup>18</sup> He attended the national tournament but did not win any awards. One article

said that he aspired to attend West Point,<sup>19</sup> though another said he wanted to go to the U.S. Air Force Academy and that “he completed the first step in the application process.”<sup>20</sup> Pierson had firearms training. A search of his home revealed “NRA qualification certificates” and a “RAMS (Rifle Archery Muzzle Loading Shotgun) ID badge.”<sup>21</sup>

Though Pierson had friends, he did not have a good reputation among many of his peers. A student who took a class with Pierson in their senior year told her parents that Pierson was disrespectful in class.<sup>22</sup> Another said, “Karl was the type of person who blamed others for everything.”<sup>23</sup> Someone else “described Karl as verbally aggressive and [said] that he did not like to be wrong.”<sup>24</sup> A classmate stated, “Karl always took a scapegoat approach, meaning that he took one or two people that caused trouble in his life and blamed them for everything and Mr. Murphy was one of those people.”<sup>25</sup>

Pierson reportedly liked to shock people, and his behavior at times struck people as bizarre. For example, a student reported that Pierson said that photographs of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School were “hilarious.” He even edited “a Korean Pop Star” into some of the photographs.<sup>26</sup> He also wore a shirt with a CCCP (Central Committee of the Communist Party) logo and talked frequently about communism; this was generally seen as his way of being provocative.

A peer reported that Pierson used marijuana,<sup>27</sup> and Pierson himself reportedly said he used marijuana and had gotten drunk a couple of times.<sup>28</sup>

### *Build-Up to the Attack*

During the academic year 2012–13, Pierson participated in a speech competition in which his opening comment was “I woke up this morning and realized my penis had fallen off.”<sup>29</sup> Though his coach, Mr. Murphy, wasn’t present, he heard from other students about the comment, and Pierson disclosed what he had said. Mr. Murphy told him that this was inappropriate.

At the beginning of the academic year 2013–14, another teacher expressed concern to Mr. Murphy that Pierson was being “a verbal bully” and telling students they were stupid.<sup>30</sup> A few days after this conversation, Pierson failed to show up at a fundraiser for the speech and debate team. Mr. Murphy thought this was irresponsible; Pierson claimed his telephone wasn’t working. This didn’t explain why he didn’t show up for the event, or why he simply didn’t find another telephone.

On 3 September 2013, Mr. Murphy informed Pierson that Pierson would no longer be captain of the speech and debate team, though he would still remain on the team. In response to being demoted, Pierson was “livid and threatening.”<sup>31</sup> According to the official report, Mr. Murphy had “never had a kid look at him with the look of hatred that Karl did that day. It was ‘haunting’ how Karl looked at him.”<sup>32</sup> Mr. Murphy was so concerned for his safety that he considered resigning from his position. He “believed it would be safer for him and it would protect others Karl might hurt trying to get to him.”<sup>33</sup> Another person reported hearing Pierson yelling to his mother in the parking lot after the meeting with Mr. Murphy. One of the comments was “I’m going to kill that Murphy!”<sup>34</sup> The assistant principal, Kevin Kolasa, called Pierson’s mother about the situation, and she kept her son out of school for three days — he was not suspended.

Perhaps making matters worse in Pierson’s mind was that the day he was demoted

was his birthday. He texted with a friend about the fact that this incident happened on his birthday.<sup>35</sup>

On 9 September, Pierson had a re-entry meeting with the assistant principal and school psychologist, Dr. Esther Song. Based on this meeting, Mr. Kolasa decided Pierson should not attend the debate team's practices or events for two or three weeks to allow for a cooling-off period. In addition, Pierson's behavior during this meeting confirmed Dr. Song's belief "that Karl was a narcissist."<sup>36</sup> Despite being told not to attend practices, Pierson showed up the very next day; Mr. Murphy told him he had to leave.

A threat assessment completed by Dr. Song recommended that Pierson have weekly meetings with a psychologist. During one of the meetings at the school, Pierson's mother reported that he had "deep seeded" anger (she presumably said "deep-seated," but it was incorrectly transcribed), and Pierson himself acknowledged his anger management problems.<sup>37</sup> The report noted multiple "at-risk" factors, including:

History of school discipline: Oppositional / Misconduct

Difficulty controlling impulses or emotions

Staff is fearful of the student

Anger reactions are extreme or disproportionate to the situation

Student currently reports or appears: angry<sup>38</sup>

As a result of his threat to kill Mr. Murphy, Pierson's parents took him to Highlands Behavioral Health System.<sup>39</sup> He was subsequently prescribed a psychiatric medication, but he recorded in his journal that it was "a joke" and that he "hated" taking the pills; he wrote, "It is important to note I rarely take my meds."<sup>40</sup> In one entry, he wrote, "I had a shrink appointment at 4, which was a massive waste of time."<sup>41</sup> He apparently was so angry about his mental health treatment that he considered committing his rampage at the treatment center: "Monday, October 15, 2013, I had an interesting idea today. In first hour, I thought about shooting up the asylum or whatever the fuck it was that my mother took me for that psych evaluation." He then added, "Let the records show I lied through my teeth."<sup>42</sup>

Multiple people reported that Pierson had anger problems.<sup>43</sup> Examples from the official report (pages 10–12) include:

Karl did have anger problems.

Karl did have a short temper.

Karl was quick to anger.

Karl could be verbally aggressive.

Karl had anger issues.

One student went into more detail:

Karl was an aggressive, outspoken, atheist, liberal, impulsive, self-serving narcissist. Karl threatened to burn down [REDACTED] church because [REDACTED] is Catholic. Karl would often “blow a gasket.” He heard Karl say, “I’m going to kill Mr. Murphy; he is now on my list.” He heard Karl call the list “the hit list.” Karl had problems with teachers because he did not like authority.<sup>44</sup>

Pierson knew himself well, commenting, “I become a monster when I’m mad.”<sup>45</sup>

Pierson’s explosive behavior regarding his demotion was not the first issue he had in high school. Mr. Kolasa reported that Pierson “had outbursts in school” and was once suspended and “on other occasions he was sent home.”<sup>46</sup> The suspension, which occurred in April 2013, was a result of Pierson’s “going off” on a teacher.<sup>47</sup> According to his mother, Pierson was angry at the teacher because of a low grade on a math test.<sup>48</sup>

The math teacher provided the following account to the police:

He told the class that he could give them their grade, and then told them that they could have it read out loud, that they could look at it and not have it read out loud or wait until he could get the test back to them. When it came to Karl, Karl said out loud. He read the grade out loud and Karl yelled “Fuck”. The girl, [REDACTED] who was sitting next to Karl said something and Karl responded with “Fuck you [REDACTED].”<sup>49</sup>

Pierson was suspended for a day for his outburst. His teacher told the police that Pierson remained angry with him for about two weeks, noting that he had never had a student carry a grudge that long.<sup>50</sup>

Besides his temper problems, Pierson had academic problems during his senior year: his “3.0 grade-point average during the second part of the 2012–13 school year plummeted to 1.7 by 2013–14.”<sup>51</sup> Pierson was failing or had Ds in multiple classes.<sup>52</sup> For someone who had a high opinion of himself, and who reportedly was in a “gifted and talented” program in grades three through eight,<sup>53</sup> the decline in his academic performance might have had a significant impact on him and possibly spurred a desire for “revenge” against certain teachers. In fact, his grades were so poor that the day before the shooting, Pierson and his father had a conversation about whether or not Pierson would be able to raise his grades enough to graduate.<sup>54</sup>

Mr. Murphy was not the only teacher who was afraid of Pierson. On 11 December 2013, Pierson was somehow locked out of his Spanish class with Ms. Lombardi. He pounded on the door and yelled to such an extent that he was heard four classes away. Once he was let into the class, he reportedly held up the middle fingers of both hands and said “Fuck you!”<sup>55</sup> to the class. Ms. Lombardi asked him to leave and called the administration for assistance, reporting that she was afraid of Pierson. The administrator sent Pierson home for the rest of the day.<sup>56</sup>

Pierson’s temper was so severe in this incident that afterwards a student feared that he was the type of person who would bring a gun to school.<sup>57</sup> This student exchanged texts with a friend about Pierson: “He’s honestly scary, like he is going to hurt us, I’m a little nervous . . . He obviously has the potential to be a threat if little stuff like that

makes him yell at a teacher.”<sup>58</sup> A classmate reported that she had heard people saying that Pierson would kill them if he could.<sup>59</sup> Another classmate said that Pierson had actually threatened to kill him,<sup>60</sup> and one peer ended a friendship with Pierson because Pierson had threatened someone for being a Christian<sup>61</sup> (whether this is the same person whose church he threatened to burn down is unknown).

Pierson had a hit list of several names. His journal described his attack plan, but parts have been redacted. He apparently intended to attack at least five people. His journal contained his timeline and intended targets:

1230: Initial strike on [REDACTED]. Enter through the trophy hallway, waltz into [REDACTED].  
Shoot up [REDACTED], toss a Molotov cocktail. Reload.  
1235: Assault [REDACTED]  
1240: Assault [REDACTED]  
1245: Assault [REDACTED]  
1250: Assault on [REDACTED]<sup>62</sup>

On the day of the rampage he had written on his arm the classrooms he intended to attack.<sup>63</sup> He apparently planned this carefully, plotting an efficient course through the school.<sup>64</sup> (A couple of weeks before the attack, Pierson asked a classmate about a girl’s class schedule; he reportedly had a grudge against this girl. Whether or not he wanted to know her schedule because she was on the hit list remains unknown.<sup>65</sup>) Besides going after Mr. Murphy, he may have intended to kill other teachers he disliked. He wrote in his journal, “Every semester, I had a class I despised, and it was on the list.”<sup>66</sup> This was written on 3 October, however, and his plans may have changed by the time of his attack.

As noted, his re-entry meeting at the school was on 9 September 2013. Just over a week later, on 17 September, he began a journal in which he documented his plans for a rampage. He wrote that the attack would be directed against “those I believe have done me wrong.”<sup>67</sup> His grandiosity and desire for power are apparent in his statement “I will do something I have wanted to do for a while — mass murder and be in a place of power where I and I alone are judge, jury and executioner.”<sup>68</sup> His grandiosity manifested itself the day before the attack, when he gave a class presentation on his desire to be a dictator.<sup>69</sup>

Though Pierson had bragged that without him the debate team would flounder and that they would come “crawling back to him,”<sup>70</sup> this did not happen. In fact, not long before his attack, the team won a big event without him, and one of his peers commented that the team had never done this well when Pierson participated.<sup>71</sup> Pierson reportedly said he was happy for the team but was perceived to be angry and resentful.

The week before his attack, Pierson showed many peers photographs on his cell phone of his recently purchased shotgun and machete. He also told some of them that he named the shotgun “Kurt Cobain.”<sup>72</sup> He even made the comment, “I should bring guns in and shoot the place up.”<sup>73</sup>

### *The Attack*

On 13 December 2013, Pierson wrote in his journal, “Today is going to be fun.”<sup>74</sup> He entered the school and fired a shot down the hallway. Two girls were sitting in the hallway, and one of them shouted, “Karl, what are you doing?”<sup>75</sup> This girl was Claire Davis. After her question to Pierson, he turned and shot her; she later died from her wounds. He fired another shot in the hall and then went into the library, shouting, “Where the fuck is Murphy?”<sup>76</sup> Murphy escaped unharmed; Pierson lit and threw a Molotov cocktail in the library, then killed himself with a shot to the head.

One student reported that after Ms. Lombardi’s class went into lockdown during the attack, someone outside the room was trying to open the door; he thinks that this was Pierson trying to get in so he could shoot Ms. Lombardi.<sup>77</sup>

Because Pierson’s journal was redacted, we don’t know the names of his intended victims. It is possible that Claire Davis was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and was not on Pierson’s hit list. Whether or not she was one of his intended victims, she may have been shot as an act of revenge. Why? At a dance during their freshman year, Pierson was very persistent in trying to dance with her, asking her over and over again. He was so brash and pushy that he even followed her into the girls’ restroom, badgering her to dance with him.<sup>78</sup> She did dance with him, but was not comfortable with him and after the dance kept her distance.<sup>79</sup> Whether or not her rejection of him played any part in his shooting her remains unknown.

### *The Role of Bullying*

Pierson wrote in his journal that after his attack he wanted “the conversation to be about elementary school teasing. Words hurt, can mold a sociopath, and will lead someone a decade later to kill.”<sup>80</sup> First of all, it isn’t clear that he was teased in elementary school, and second of all, even if he had been, that does not explain his wanting to kill the teacher who demoted him.

In high school, Pierson was condescending, insulting, and rude to his peers and sometimes to his teachers. Multiple people described him as abrasive. His abrasiveness might have generated hostility toward him, but he does not appear to have been an innocent victim of harassment. Ms. Lombardi reported that Pierson was not bullied in her class; rather, he was rude to his peers and was therefore not liked.<sup>81</sup> A classmate stated that Pierson bullied him, calling him “moron,” “stupid,” and “fat”; Pierson also belittled a classmate who was giving a class presentation.<sup>82</sup> Pierson was also reported to have bullied his peers on the speech and debate team.<sup>83</sup> He even insulted those people who considered themselves his friends.<sup>84</sup>

Whether he was teased in elementary or middle school is unknown. If he treated his peers as badly in his earlier years as he did in high school, then what he perceived as being picked on may have been a result of his own obnoxious behavior.

### *Romantic Rejections*

Because the law enforcement documents have been redacted, it is impossible to sort out the multiple testimonies about Pierson’s romantic interests. Different students



may have referred to the same person, but without knowing names, the reports are unclear. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to say that Pierson endured significant rejections from girls he was interested in, and experienced rage as a result. A few examples will be cited.

One peer reported that Pierson “got rejected a lot.”<sup>85</sup> A friend reported that Pierson “had trouble getting dates and would be sullen about that. He tried to obtain dates with girls who were ‘out of his league’ or unavailable.”<sup>86</sup> He was very persistent, however, and reportedly “hit on” one girl “every day,”<sup>87</sup> but apparently failed in his pursuit of her.

When a girl declined his invitation to the homecoming dance in 2012, he reportedly hated her and scapegoated her<sup>88</sup> (there was another report that he “hated” a girl who rejected him for homecoming,<sup>89</sup> but whether this was the same girl or another one is unknown). Despite this rejection, he did find a girl to take to the homecoming dance, but later reportedly was angry with her because she had not been supportive of him during his parents’ divorce.<sup>90</sup>

Pierson was reportedly angry with a girl because she rejected his invitation to the prom the previous year.<sup>91</sup> Following this rejection (or perhaps that of another girl who turned him down for the prom), he was said to have hated her and blamed her for “everything that happened.”<sup>92</sup>

One of the girls who rejected his invitation to the prom in junior year later experienced his anger. She had posted a joke on Facebook: “What’s the difference between me and a calendar? A calendar has dates.” In response to this, Pierson posted, “Nothing, they’re both inexorable pieces of trash.”<sup>93</sup>

A girl who attended a different school also rejected Pierson: “When I told him I was not interested he got very upset.”<sup>94</sup>

In August 2013, Pierson’s mother received a call from a man who said that a male had called his house from the Pierson home telephone and “said he was going to kill his daughter.”<sup>95</sup> Pierson admitted to his mother that he had threatened to kill the girl; making this death threat to the girl was a dramatic example of his rage at rejection.

Finding a girlfriend was clearly important to him, as indicated not only by his persistent efforts but also by a comment he texted to a girl: “Do you think I can ever find a girl?”<sup>96</sup> He wrote this on 17 October 2013. Shortly after this, he met another girl from a different school; they texted back and forth and went on three dates in November and December 2013. She may not have been a girlfriend, but she was on good terms with Pierson. Even though he was planning mass murder, he impressed her parents as “extremely polite, well-spoken and well mannered.”<sup>97</sup>

Finally, as discussed earlier, he failed in his pursuit of Claire Davis as a freshman and gunned her during his attack. Whether these two facts are related is unknown.

### *Military Aspirations*

Pierson apparently was interested in both the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and the Air Force Academy. Because some of the people interviewed simply referred to the “academy,” it isn’t clear which military school was meant. Pierson talked about his military aspirations with his peers. According to one of his classmates, Pierson “constantly talked down to him and would tell him he didn’t have a chance to get into the military, but he (KARL) was a ‘shoe in.’”<sup>98</sup>



Based on comments by his mother, he seems to have begun the application process for West Point but later “learned that his file had been closed because he had not been actively working on it.”<sup>99</sup> When this occurred is unknown. On 3 September 2013, someone wrote on his Facebook page, “Hope your Academy application process is running smoothly.”<sup>100</sup>

Pierson may have given up this aspiration both because of his disciplinary record and because his grades were so poor during his senior year. He reportedly talked about his suspension ruining his chances.<sup>101</sup> He also reportedly found out that his grades were too low to qualify.<sup>102</sup> He apparently had hoped to be nominated for West Point by Congressman Coffman, but the congressman did not nominate him.<sup>103</sup>

### *Commentary*

The picture of Karl Pierson that emerges from the investigative records is one of an arrogant, condescending, bad-tempered young man. He had an exalted view of himself and routinely insulted and demeaned his peers. He aspired to “be in a place of power where I and I alone are judge, jury and executioner.” Like Eric Harris, who wrote, “I would love to be the ultimate judge and say if a person lives or dies — be godlike,”<sup>104</sup> Pierson wanted to experience the ultimate power of deciding who lives and who dies.

Perhaps because he was so narcissistic, he apparently could not accept that he ever did anything wrong. He demonstrated an inability to take responsibility for his own behavior. He reportedly was not remorseful about his explosive, intimidating behavior toward Mr. Murphy and saw no need to apologize.<sup>105</sup> Even when a girl he liked suggested that he apologize to Mr. Murphy, Pierson wrote back, “I’m not at fault.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, immediately after his enraged response to being locked out of Ms. Lombardi’s class, as he was being escorted to the administrative office, Pierson said, “This is not my fault.”<sup>107</sup>

Like many other psychopathic shooters, Pierson was an “injustice collector.” He went through life accumulating injustices he believed he had suffered. He was reported to hold grudges and “scapegoat” people. He not only denied responsibility for his behavior; he did not get over conflicts, letting them fester and building up his rage.

Another noteworthy trait is that despite his frequently abrasive behavior, Pierson was good at “impression management,” meaning he could make a good impression when he wanted to. This is common among psychopathic individuals. Thus, despite being full of rage and planning mass murder, he made a quite favorable impression on a girl and her parents. This girl (who went on three dates with him) described him as both kind and polite, stating, “I really liked him.”<sup>108</sup>

This discrepancy is also seen in the different attitudes of his classmates, depending on which version of Pierson they saw. As noted, there were students who were afraid of him or did not like him because of his arrogance and rudeness. Some peers even anticipated violence from him. In contrast, there were other peers who liked him and maintained friendships with him. One girl said she was friends with him for two years. She told police that Pierson “was a very sweet kid,” commenting that she “never saw this [the attack] coming.”<sup>109</sup>

Besides having psychopathic personality traits, Pierson experienced multiple blows to his grandiosity. These included disciplinary actions at school, demotion from his posi-

tion on the speech and debate team, frequent romantic rejections, significant academic failures, giving up his dream of serving in the military, and the success of the speech and debate team without him. In addition, his parents' divorce reportedly hit him hard.

Like many young school shooters (see *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*), Pierson had role models for violence. After the attack, police found a book about the Columbine High School attack in Pierson's bedroom.<sup>110</sup> In addition, Pierson's computer revealed that he had searched for websites about the massacres at Columbine and Sandy Hook Elementary School; he also had photographs of these two attacks on his computer.<sup>111</sup>

Pierson's journal echoed the words of Eric Harris. For example, Harris wrote, "I'm full of hate and I love it."<sup>112</sup> Pierson wrote, "I am filled with hate, I love it."<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Harris said, "It's a weird feeling knowing you're going to be dead in two and a half weeks."<sup>114</sup> Pierson wrote, "It's weird going through life knowing that in 19 days, I'm going to be dead."<sup>115</sup> Also, Harris and Klebold referred to their attack as "NBK," which was the abbreviation for one of their favorite films, *Natural Born Killers*. Like Harris and Klebold, Pierson used the abbreviation "NBK"<sup>116</sup> and he listed the film as one that he liked.<sup>117</sup> In another possible imitation, Pierson wrote "KMFDm" on a test at school when he got a disappointing grade;<sup>118</sup> KMFDm was one of Harris's favorite music groups. (This may have been meant as an indirect threat to the teacher; the band's name abbreviates a German expression generally translated as "no mercy/pity for the majority.")

Prior to going on his rampage, Pierson went bowling.<sup>119</sup> This may have been done in imitation of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who allegedly went bowling the morning of their attack. Though this turned out to be false, the idea became widespread, and inspired the title of the film *Bowling for Columbine*.

Pierson also appears to have found inspiration in historical figures. He wrote on his arm "Alea Iacta Est," which is Latin for "the die is cast" and is attributed to Julius Caesar. Pierson may have known that Marc Lépine, the École Polytechnique school shooter, included the same Latin phrase in his suicide note,<sup>120</sup> though there is no evidence that he knew of this.

Another historical reference is found in his name for his attack: Saguntum88. Saguntum was the site of a siege in 219 BCE; Hannibal reportedly had every adult in the town put to death. The significance of "88" to Pierson is uncertain. Because *h* is the eighth letter of the alphabet, the number 88 is sometimes used to mean "Heil Hitler."<sup>121</sup> Pierson reportedly was interested in Hitler and the Nazis and had a swastika as his computer's screensaver.<sup>122</sup> He also reportedly made bigoted comments. As noted above, he expressed anti-Catholic sentiment. He also was said to have been racist, commenting that he hated Blacks.<sup>123</sup> He also wrote the comment in his school planner, "Jim Crow was mah nigga."<sup>124</sup> His racist comments included the use of the "n-word."<sup>125</sup>

Pierson had *The Anarchist's Cookbook* and talked about this to multiple peers. This is apparently how he learned how to make the Molotov cocktails that he used in his attack. He may have discovered this book on his own, or perhaps he was again copying Eric Harris, who also read the book and made explosives.

Though the available excerpts from Pierson's journal do not connect the date of his attack with the rampage at Sandy Hook, the timing suggests a possible link. The attack at Sandy Hook occurred on Friday, 14 December 2012; Pierson's attack was Fri-

day, 13 December 2013. This was the closest he could get to the anniversary of Sandy Hook because 14 December was a Saturday and the school would have been closed.

In summary, this incident contains numerous parallels with other school shootings. The attack was the result of a combination of Pierson's extreme narcissism and multiple experiences of failure and lost status. He held grudges and intended to commit a targeted attack against specific individuals whom he perceived as having wronged him. He made threats and exhibited such intense rage that staff and students were afraid of him and believed him capable of violence. Despite the warning signs, he kept his intentions secret, with the result that an innocent girl was killed.

### Notes

- 1 Kristin McCauley, "Investigative Report: Arapahoe High School," 2014, p. 29. Available at *School Shooters .info*.
- 2 Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office (ACSO), "Arapahoe High School Investigation," p. 1,675. Available at *School Shooters .info*.
- 3 McCauley, "Investigative Report," p. 30.
- 4 McCauley, "Investigative Report," p. 29.
- 5 ACSO, p. 9.
- 6 Michael Martinez and Stan Wilson, "School Gunman Karl Pierson Liked Debate, Running, but Acted 'Weird' at Times," *CNN*, 14 December 2013.
- 7 Zahira Torres and Yesenia Robles, "Arapahoe High Gunman Held Strong Political Beliefs, Classmates Said," *Denver Post*, 13 December 2013.
- 8 Zahira Torres, "Mark Pierson Speaks About Son Karl and Shooting at Arapahoe High," *Denver Post*, 14 October 2014.
- 9 Torres and Robles, "Arapahoe High Gunman."
- 10 Michele Sample, "Teacher Empowers Students by Introducing Issues of Today," *Lone Tree Voice*, 8 December 2008.
- 11 McCauley, "Investigative Report," p. 4.
- 12 McCauley, "Investigative Report," p. 12.
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