

## Pay homage to innocent, deny killer the spotlight

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To his friends, Ryan Clark was known as "Stack."

Ryan was the kind of guy who wanted to know everyone. He introduced himself to strangers and was always the first to lend a helping hand. He spent his summers counselling kids and adults with special needs.

When he wasn't studying, the 22-year-old Georgia native loved listening to music – everything from Bob Marley to Kenny G – and making t-shirts with his friend Kim.

Ryan lost his life last week at Virginia Tech.

His neighbour in the school's dorm was Emily Jane Hilscher. She studied animal and poultry sciences and worked at a veterinarian's office. Emily, only 19, enjoyed snowboarding and described herself as an "animal lover."

Friends say she was one of the nicest people they have ever met. Those in the small town where she was raised say Emily and her sister were from a wonderful, close-knit family.

She recently came first in Virginia's food and beverage service competition and was excited about testing her culinary skills at the National Skills USA Conference later this year in Kansas City. Emily also loved chemistry.

She lost her life last week, too.

These are the stories of just two victims from last Monday's devastating shooting at Virginia Tech University. Thirty-two people – sons, daughters, mothers, fathers – were gunned down while attending class.

Since then, questions have swirled around the identity and motive of the shooter. Who was he? What was he like? Why did he do this? Every minute detail about his life has become front-page news.

But the names of those whose lives he abruptly ended have appeared mostly on simple victims' lists. They initially received more attention, usually during vigils or memorials, but in the long run were overshadowed by the killer.



REUTERS  
Students join hands and pray together on the Drill Field at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, April 18, 2007.

This is nothing new. When tragedy strikes, perpetrators are all too often etched into history while victims are reduced to statistics. We come to remember the names of murderers, but rarely their victims. It's those victims whom we should be remembering. By shining the light on murderers, we give them the notoriety they so often crave. By instead focusing on their victims, we can honour them for who they were – individuals with lives in full swing. People who, by every right, should still be with us today.

And while it is important to understand what drives a person to commit murder, the near-obsessive attention often has a glamourizing effect. It's no surprise, then, that school shootings sometimes result in copy-cat attacks.

That is why we refuse to mention the name of last week's shooter, or any other like him.

This is an homage to the innocent.

Like Anastasia DeSousa, the bright 18-year-old killed at Montreal's Dawson College last September. Friends remember her positive, upbeat approach to life, symbolized by the bright clothes she loved to wear. Pink was her favourite colour.

Anastasia was always the first to say a cheerful "hi" when she saw someone she knew at school or on the street. She regularly had a smile on her face and loved spending time with her friends.

Or Jason Lang, whose life ended at age 17 when he was shot at his Taber, Alberta school eight years ago this week. He was a quiet guy, but enjoyed being around children and was very compassionate toward others.

Jason loved cars and always dreamed of buying a black Chevrolet Camaro. He worked a part-time job after school to save money for it, and finally got his wish – three days before his death.

Then there is Steven Robert Curnow, only 14 when he died at Columbine High School. He wanted to be a pilot, was very close with his mom Susan and loved playing soccer with his team The Blue Devils. He even worked as a referee.

Steven's favourite movie was *Star Wars* and he anxiously awaited the newest addition to the series, *The Phantom Menace*. He had watched the film's original trilogy so many times he could recite much of the dialogue.

The names – and the stories – could go on.

To friends and family, these names represent their loved ones. But to the rest of us, they are faceless victims, not just of bullets but of a history that too often forgets.

It doesn't have to be this way though. By honouring the innocent for who they were, we deny murders the final satisfaction of knowing they can grab the spotlight by taking lives.

So as time passes and headlines fade, let us remember Ryan, Emily, Anastasia, Jason, Steven and all those like them – young people who went to school one day and never came home.

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