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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Personal safety

As someone who has experienced personal assaults, I regularly utilize precautions I learned in self-defense classes. I walk with vigilance, I lock doors at home, and I have a wooden dowel in my bedroom, just in case. Sometimes it's difficult to explain to my husband why it freaks me out when he forgets to lock the door. But these are basic precautions that add a modicum of safety in what is increasingly a dangerous world.

On October 1 while on my way from Portland to Ashland on Interstate 5, somewhere past Eugene, strings of police cars with lights flashing passed my car all the way to Roseburg. I did not learn about the Umpqua Community College shooting until I arrived in Ashland. Like many teachers I know, I took it personally.

For three years, I've taught classes at a local community college. On the first day I taught at the school, it occurred to me how isolated the buildings and departments are from each other. Many of the classrooms have only one door that locks from the outside. If someone came into a classroom bent on committing violence, the people in the room would be trapped, with their only recourse being to hide under a bare table. While teaching at the college, I also realized that many of my mostly male students not only have mental-health issues, but several own guns and love to go shooting, either to hunt or for target practice.

Last year, I worked on a radio documentary for the British Broadcasting Corporation's World Service program about a small town in Eastern Oregon. During the tapings, I learned that within the community, the K-12 school accepted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding gun possession by teachers on the premises. The reasons given by staff were that first responders would take too long to show up because the town is isolated and the people at the school should be able to protect themselves.

Regardless if you're in a small town or a large city, gun ownership can pose a personal-safety issue to the community. I felt that more intensely while working at the college, especially after experiencing anger directed toward me by some of my male students. Not only does a teacher have to worry about physical safety because of students who are potentially packing guns, but there is also the risk that an attack could manifest online.

As a teacher, I believe I best serve my students by challenging them to work hard. In one particular class, which was dominated by white 20-something men, I found they didn't want to do homework, demanded all the attention, and basically only wanted to talk and text. The atmosphere of the class turned bitter cold whenever I encouraged students to take notes or do assignments, and when I tried to involve the female and minority students in class discussions.

It took one brave student of color showing me a private Facebook page on which the bullies of the class had posted degrading memes and comments directed at me that I found out the reason. The men had asserted this chilling effect on the class to maintain a superior status. Rather than do the required classwork, they chose to secretly shame me, sending a clear message to their classmates that no one should get too close to me lest they suffer the same fate.

On the last day of the term, a few of the students of color and some of the women revealed to me privately that they too had been bullied all year. They felt little recourse except to endure it, which turned out to be true for me as well. When I talked with my superiors and the human-resources department, it was clear the responsibility to discipline or take any kind of action to reprimand the students was on me alone.

I had been operating under the illusion that my work experience, track record, and knowledge would garner respect and protect me. In reality, none of that matters because I am a middle-aged woman. While some might have a "boys will be boys" attitude regarding cyberbullying, this type of behavior directed at a fellow student experiencing mental-health issues could inspire the kind of gun violence that has become far too frequent in our culture.

These experiences make me question the safety of the classroom for myself as a teacher as well as for my students. I have not decided yet if I will continue teaching. I realize it took only one angry person with easy access to guns to massacre nine people, injure nine others, and devastate family, friends, and the community. Safety improvements need to be made at schools across our country. Until then, I don't know if, for me, it's worth the risk.

Opinions expressed in this newspaper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of this publication.

Wondering what events are going on this week?

Check out The Asian Reporter's Community & A.C.E. Calendar sections, on pages 10 and 12.