

Notes for “Life After Death” Lede comparison (Meredith Wadman):

This is the lede from the first draft of the story that I filed. Then you have for comparison the lede in the published article. We ended up changing it for several reasons:

- 1. The article wasn't running until May, three months after the murders, and we thought, since it was ultimately about how the department was coping, and not a breaking news story about the murders, it needed to open with something showing that recovery.*
- 2. It made sense to open with someone directly affected by the murders (Joe Ng.)*
- 3. It felt not quite right to open with Chris Gunter because she was a former Nature manuscript editor and really still connected to the magazine through personal friendships and spoke with me for that reason.*

First lede

On a sunny Monday morning in early March, Chris Gunter was teaching 26 biology students at the University of Alabama at Huntsville (UAH) about long-term potentiation in neurons. Seated in desks in a classroom in the Shelby Center for Science and Technology, the students asked Gunter how long-term potentiation -- -- the enhancement of signal transmission between two neurons that results from stimulating them synchronously -- relates to learning, and how specific therapeutics might affect this.

“It was hard,” says Gunter, a geneticist by training, who is director of research affairs at the Hudson Alpha Institute for Biotechnology in Huntsville [and who was until 2008 editor for genetics and genomics manuscripts at Nature.] “I am used to trying to be excellent...and my knowledge was very thin.” She had not studied long term potentiation, she notes, for “a very long time.”

Gunter had not planned to be teaching undergraduate neuroscience that morning. But on a quiet Friday afternoon three weeks earlier, the class’s designated professor, Amy Bishop, then 45 (her DOB is April 24 1964), had [allegedly] pulled out a black nine millimetre pistol during a biology faculty meeting in Room 369R, a small, windowless conference room tucked in a corner of the third floor beside the photocopiers. She fired it methodically at colleagues seated elbow to elbow around a table, shooting people in the head, execution style. She began to her right, with department chairman Gopi Podila, and then shot department assistant Stephanie Monticciolo, seated to Podila’s right. She next turned to her left and shot Adriel Johnson, Maria Ragland Davis and Joseph Leahy. She killed Podila, Johnson and Davis, and critically wounded Monticciollo and Leahy. Another biologist seated to Bishop’s left, Luis Cruz-Vera, sustained a minor wound to the chest.

Published lede

Last month, Joseph Ng, a biologist at the University of Alabama, Huntsville (UAH), sat down with very mixed feelings to write a job advertisement for a new chair of the biology department. The provisional draft said that the department was seeking “an energetic and visionary leader” who could preside over the hiring of several junior faculty members.

What the ad didn't talk about, and couldn't possibly describe, were the events that left so many holes to fill.

On a Friday afternoon in early February, Amy Bishop, an assistant professor in the department, pulled out a black 9-millimetre pistol during a biology faculty meeting. “She just went down the line”, wearing a look that was “cold, very cold”, says Ng. At point-blank range, Bishop shot five of her colleagues in the head, killing three of them and critically wounding two others.

Ng, seated at the opposite end of the table, thought she would murder them all.

In the space of seconds, Bishop cut the 14-strong faculty by more than a third. Ever since, the survivors have been struggling with the enormous task of repairing the shattered department even as they try to heal their own emotional wounds. With 473 undergraduate majors, the biology department is the second largest on the Huntsville campus, and the shooting left nine courses without teachers. Twenty-one master's and doctoral students suddenly had no mentors. And seven research grants lost their principal investigators (see ‘Keeping research grants alive’).