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From the Los Angeles Times

A deadly hush in Room 211 -- then the killer returned

Bodies lay where only moments before the students were laughing about their French. 'Shhh,' one warned.

By Erika Hayasaki

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BLACKSBURG, VA. -- The first pops echoed from a distance, but nobody thought much of it.

Construction crews had been hammering and drilling for weeks below the window of Room 211 in Norris Hall at Virginia Tech. Professor Jocelyne Couture-Nowak went on teaching.

The pops turned to muffled bangs -- then loud staccato blasts. They sounded close, like they were coming from the hall.

Please tell me that isn't what I think it is, Madame Couture said.

It's just hammers, a student reassured her. The professor opened the door and peeked outside, then slammed it shut.

Her face was white with terror.

Get to the back! Get under your desks! Madame Couture ordered. Call 911!

Emily Haas pressed herself against a back wall and squeezed her eyes shut. Her sorority sister, Allison Cook, curled up nearby.

"Put the desks in front of the door!" cried Clay Violand from the back of the room, as students scattered onto the floor, lying behind desks.

The professor pushed several lightweight desks made of metal and plastic in front of the door. She backed up against a wall.

Colin Goddard, lying in front of Violand, shielded his 6-foot-3 body under a desk. But his limbs stuck out. He dialed 911. Room 211, Norris Hall, he told the operator. He thought of jumping out of a window, but it had to be cranked open with a lever. There wasn't enough time.

Goddard saw bullets pierce the door. The 911 operator was still talking. He saw the gunman's boots and pants. Goddard did not look at his face.

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It was a class of 22 intermediate French students. Madame Couture, as they called her, was its heart.

Since the start of the spring semester in January, the students met three days a week. Madame Couture was so passionate about the language she would break into a French song during class, urging the students to sing along. She would flail her arms like a conductor and they would follow her lead, botching lyrics and singing out of tune. The French-Canadian woman loved teaching the language. Sometimes, she got so excited about a

lesson it made her breathless.

On Monday before class, Madame Couture stopped by the foreign languages department at Major Williams Hall. Fabrice Teulon, an associate professor of French, talked to her briefly about the spring chill. Madame Couture told her she had recently planted flowers in her garden. She worried they would die in the frost.

Goddard, 21, woke up at 8:40 a.m. He showered and put on a blue long-sleeved shirt. He was an international studies major who had lived in Somalia, Bangladesh and Indonesia. He was drawn to people like classmate Kristina Heeger, who had also lived in different parts of the world. She was having car trouble so he swung by to pick her up. They talked about cutting French, but decided not to. They arrived a few minutes late, and sat together a few rows back near the door.

Haas, 19, put on jeans, her mother's old yellow T-shirt and a blue fleece. She arrived early and sat in the middle of the room next to Cook, her Pi Beta Phi sorority sister. The two had known each other for years and had attended the same church in Richmond, Va. Haas talked about the horse race she went to over the weekend. Minutes later, Haas moved to the back of the room because Madame Couture paired her with a freshman who was known for her sweet smile.

Violand, 20, usually sat near the front. He was a bass player who had untamed long hair. He was sluggish in the mornings. As he often did, Violand arrived late and took a seat in the back row. The professor did not get mad at his tardiness. It was not her way.

The others floated in. One young man wearing his Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets uniform sat in his usual seat in the front near the door. A poet and computer techie sat nearby wearing a black newsboy cap. An Alpha Delta Pi sorority member arrived in sweat pants. She sat against a wall. A former high school basketball star sat in the third row in the middle. Her mother always told her to sit close to the teacher to get the best learning experience.

The class started at 9:05 a.m. with a cheerful "Bonjour!" This was how Madame Couture, 49, always greeted her students. She had lived in Quebec and Nova Scotia. She had helped found a French-language grade school in 1997. She was the mother of two daughters and a stepdaughter. Her husband was the head of Virginia Tech's horticulture department. The professor's pebble-gray and white hair fell past her shoulders, and she glowed with a dimpled smile.

Snowflakes swirled outside Norris Hall, a square-shaped building made of stone and surrounded by bare trees.

On this blustery April morning, 28 students and five teachers at Virginia Tech would die -- including 12 from Room 211. Witnesses would later say the gunman, Seung-hui Cho, 23, killed himself in this classroom.

But inside Room 211, death had yet to taint the students' thoughts. The television was tuned to a French newscast. The lesson was superlatives and comparative vocabulary.

It was a course largely based on conversation, and Madame Couture saw to it that everyone talked. They learned a lot about each other this way. If someone spent the weekend drinking beer, the class found out. If someone didn't do the homework, it was no secret.

Halfway through the class, the professor stood with her back facing a blackboard writing students' sentences on a clear sheet on an overhead projector. She got to Haas' sentence. It translated: Britney Spears has been married more often than Christina Aguilera.

Students laughed.

There were about 30 desks in the small rectangular room. The aisles were crammed with book bags. There was

little space to walk, much less anyplace to hide.

The shooting begins

Cho started shooting people near the window first, moving up and down the aisles. Girls screamed. Goddard felt a rush of air rip through his leg. He smelled gunpowder. He had been hit. He dropped the phone.

Haas felt sharp pangs at the back of her head. She wasn't sure if she had been shot or grazed.

Violand locked eyes with Cook, who was next to him. Both were still alive, but neither knew how long they would be. They stared at each other as shots exploded around them. Her eyes gave him comfort. With every shot and every moan, Violand thought another student was down. He waited to die.

The shooting paused. Haas heard the gunman leave. The pounding of bullets sounded softer now. They were coming from outside the room. Haas opened her eyes and saw a shell lying next to her face on the multicolored carpet. She picked up Goddard's phone and told the operator again: Room 211, Norris Hall. The operator told her to keep talking. Haas told the operator she had to be quiet because she thought the gunman could come back. Just breathe, the operator said, just breathe. Goddard asked Heeger if she was OK.

"Shhh," said Violand, raising his head. He told everyone to be quiet. He didn't want the gunman to know they were still alive.

All around them, students played dead. Others were. There were sounds of people gurgling and gasping for breath. About 10 minutes later, Cho came back. He went around the room again, emptying his gun. The floor was crowded, making it hard for Cho to get to the back of the room. He fired more rounds. He reloaded.

Goddard saw Cho's shoes. He was coming toward him again. Cho shot Goddard twice more, this time in the shoulder and buttocks.

There was a final blast.

The students did not know whether the gunman was still alive, waiting to shoot anyone who moved.

Outside, sirens blared.

Goddard waited for Madame Couture to give the class directions. He figured she would tell them what to do next. But he did not hear her voice.

Haas heard police in the hall. They were trying to open the door, but something was blocking it. Haas got up. She did not look around the room. She did not want to see. When Haas reached the door, she glanced down. She saw the professor sprawled in front of the door, lifeless.

Haas put down the cellphone and pulled the door open. She waved a hand outside, and slipped out of the room. Six others had survived. Only Violand was not shot. He came out next. Cook followed him. She had been shot in the arm. Violand took her hand. Hilary Strollo, the girl in sweat pants, had been shot in the stomach and buttocks, and a bullet had grazed her head. She got up, took three steps and collapsed.

Goddard couldn't walk. Next to him, Heeger was bleeding too. She had been shot in the back. Nearby, a freshman had been shot in the leg.

Police entered Room 211. Goddard heard an officer yell, "Shooter down." Cho was dead.

They can't forget

The gunfire was over. The snow had stopped falling. Madame Couture was dead, and so were 11 students from Room 211. Among them: the former high school basketball player, the cadet, the girl with the sweet smile, the computer whiz with the newsboy cap.

Cho killed people inside four classrooms at Norris Hall that day. Room 211 suffered the greatest death toll.

The survivors cannot forget.

Photos of dead classmates pop up on televisions and Madame Couture's former students pause: "There's Matt." "There's Reema." "There's Ross."

Violand has flashbacks in the middle of conversations. He cannot shake the dreadful sounds of death. Alone at night, he cries.

Haas, who had been grazed in the back of the head, received two stitches and went home to Richmond. But she wanted badly to be back at Virginia Tech, reunited with her French classmates. Haas didn't think anyone else could understand how she felt -- the guilt for living when so many others did not, this longing to hear Madame Couture say "Bonjour!" once more.

Seven days passed. Candles flickered and burned out. Roses wilted. The weather turned warm and students returned to campus. Mourners replaced dead flowers with fresh ones.

On Tuesday, several of the classmates attended Madame Couture's funeral at the campus horticulture garden, a meadow by a rippling stream. Haas saw Violand. He was holding a white rose. She hugged him. They had not seen each other since that fateful class.

A few minutes later, Goddard showed up in a wheelchair. Violand and Haas went over to him. Three other students from the French class joined them, including Luke Sponholz, who had missed class last Monday. His best friend was killed, and Madame Couture had been his favorite teacher.

Before last week, they had been classmates, linked by their passionate professor. Now they were friends, united in her death. It was a bittersweet bond that no one else could really understand.

During the service, Violand bowed his head. Haas patted his back. They listened silently as Sponholz offered these words in French on his classmates' behalf: "Madame, have you touched all of us in a profound way that we will never forget, and will we always love you?"

"Mais oui, Madame. Mais oui."

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Times staff writer Richard Fausset contributed to this report.

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