

# Virtue In Action

Virginia Tech – Perseverance and Courage in Tragedy

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



**THIRTY-THREE MEMORIAL STONES  
ADORNED WITH FLOWERS AND OTHER  
MEMENTOS FOR EACH OF SEUNG-HUI  
CHO'S VICTIMS AND THERE IS ONE FOR  
CHO. (AP PHOTO/ROBERT F. BUKATY)**

**T**he shootings at Virginia Tech are another reminder of the sad reality that within our world tragedy exists and will likely always exist.

Within such tragedies, we naturally search for answers such as what motivated the killer and could it have been prevented. These are worthy questions to ask and in pursuing the answers, we can learn things that may help prevent similar tragedies in the future. However, these answers will come slowly and only through a careful and detailed evaluation.

In this lesson we will focus on another reality of our world, that within tragedy we often see the incredible goodness of humanity - a goodness that shines through and offers us hope. During the shootings, there were amazing stories of **courage** with professors and students placing their lives at risk to save others. Also **ennobling** is the sense of **perseverance** demonstrated by the Virginia Tech community as students, professors and the university administration have demonstrated their absolute determination to move forward in refocusing their lives on pursuing worthy goals and to find greater meaning in the face of seemingly senseless loss.

#### **Amid chaos, heroes emerge**

Police officials are still piecing together the events of April 17, when the shooter, a loner named Seung-Hui Cho, age 23, killed two students, then hours later laid siege to students and faculty inside Virginia Tech's engineering building.

Within the engineering building, at least 11 lives were saved thanks in part to senior Zach Petkewicz's quick thinking. According to a CNN segment that featured statements from Petkewicz, he was initially frozen with fear when he and others heard gunshots and screams in the hallway of the building. "I was completely scared out of my mind originally, just went into a cowering position, and then just realized you have got to do something."

Petkewicz then leapt into action, leading two other



Romanian-born lecturer Liviu Librescu and wife Marlena are seen in an undated photo. (AP Photo, courtesy Librescu family)

**"Librescu's actions gave the students time to open windows and jump out of the classroom."**

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students in holding a table against the classroom door, as Cho shot bullets through the door trying to force his way in. The three students held their position, even as bullets passed inches from their bodies. Eventually, Cho gave up trying to enter the classroom.

The statements and actions of Petkewicz and many others during the tragedy reveal an important reality about courage. Courage isn't about being able to somehow ignore fear. The student heroes fully realized and felt the fear, yet they were able to overcome their fear and to meet the danger head on for the benefit of others.

#### **Holocaust survivor puts others before himself**

Unfortunately, the shooter was more **persistent** in another area of the building, in a classroom occupied by Holocaust survivor and mathematics lecturer Liviu

Librescu. Librescu, who taught for 20 years at Virginia Tech University, had obviously faced horror before, but he likely wasn't expecting it again on April 17 when Cho began roaming the hallways, shooting students and teachers.

Librescu reacted quickly, and by many accounts, kept the shooter from claiming as many victims as he could have during the massacre. Librescu's son told the Associated Press how his father "blocked the doorway with his body and asked the students to flee." Librescu's actions gave the students time to open windows and jump out of the classroom. Sadly, Librescu was not able to make it to safety with them. He was shot by Cho along with 31 others that day, but he left behind a legacy of heroism and gratitude.

Librescu's wife said she has been overwhelmed with emails from thankful students aided by their professor's courage. She called her husband "a good man" and the media rightfully dubbed Librescu an "uncommon hero."

### **Focusing on the Good Moving Forward**

A day after the killings that rocked the campus—and the country -- Librescu and the other 31 fallen Virginia Tech faculty and students were memorialized by university officials, clergy, the governor of Virginia and President George Bush.

"If you've had a chance to read the biographies, the short stories of those who were killed, you just uncover marvelous stories of joy and learning, of friendships, of hobbies and the thrill of teaching and educating generations of students," Virginia Governor Tim Kaine said during a prayer service. "Each of these stories offers these wonderful portraits of what human life can be."

The sense of loss was great as "those whose lives were taken did nothing to deserve their fate," Bush said, but the need for students, teachers and the nation to **persevere** is even greater. "On this terrible day of mourning, it's hard to imagine that a time will come when life at Virginia Tech will return to normal...But such a day will come. And when it does, you will always remember the friends and teachers who were lost Tuesday, and the time you shared with them, and the lives they hoped to lead."

It's important to move on for the sake of those who

perished, said Pastor Tommy McDearis, a Blacksburg Baptist Church clergyman from Virginia who notified 20 families that a loved one had been killed by Cho. "There is no way that any of them would ever look at us and want to give up," McDearis advised the families, according to the Associated Press. "We owe them more than to just throw in the towel."

Virginia Tech students, despite permission from the faculty to skip a semester, overwhelmingly expressed a desire to return to class.

"I think we all need a sense of normalcy, of routine back into it," Virginia Tech sophomore Tricia Sangalang commented on CNN's "Anderson Cooper: 360 Degrees." "I think it's important that we show everyone that, you know, this isn't going to bring us down. It's not going to stop us from continuing on. And this is a first step to moving forward as a community, as students."

Corey Hanifen, a Virginia Tech sophomore, said he too was ready to move on and get back into campus life, but this time armed with a lesson he didn't learn from a textbook.

"Things are a lot more precious than you would ever think they would be," Hanifen told a "360 Degrees" correspondent. "All the things you took for granted, they aren't for granted."

### **Don't let darkness win**

Senseless deaths and horrific events happen, in our nation and in the world. Pastor McDearis discussed during his AP interview that "If we give up in the face of this situation, if we quit doing all the things that really matter in life because this darkness has visited us, then we are going to surrender to the darkness."

Fortunately, the Virginia Tech community has shown us how to not give in to the darkness. The stories of courage prove once again that we are capable of great and noble deeds, even in the face of danger. The determination of students and administrators to move forward with their lives, with a renewed focus on the values of their fallen friends, also shows us how to persevere through adversity. Yes, tragedy is a part of world, but it is important to remember that so is goodness, and we can each dedicate ourselves to working to ensure that goodness prevails.

**VOCABULARY**

**Courage:** the capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice

**Persistent:** refusing to give up or let go

**Perseverance:** trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Convocation: a formal assembly at a college or university

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**Virtue In Action**

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## Virginia Tech – Seeing Perseverance and Courage in Tragedy

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Thirty-three memorial stones adorned with flowers and other mementos for each of Seung-Hui Cho's victims and there is one for Cho. (AP Photo)

### Lesson Goals

- Develop understanding of the virtues of perseverance and courage
- Help students see how these virtues help us deal with tragedy in our lives, no matter how senseless
- Inspire students to move forward despite uncertainty in the world, with a renewed focus on lasting values
- Inspire students to see some positives in the wake of an event that likely impacts many young people

### Discussion Question Options

1. Which virtues are practiced by student Zach Petkewicz and teacher Liviu Librescu? How did each of them react in the face of the Virginia Tech shootings? Why do you think these stories stand out, and explain how they inspire you?
2. How do Virginia Tech students seem to be reacting to the tragedy? How do you think you would react in this situation? Would you go back to school after such an incident? Explain why or why not?
3. What does the virtue of perseverance mean? How does it play into the aftermath of the shootings?
4. What advice does Pastor McDearis offer to the families of shooting victims? Do

you think it's realistic? Explain why or why not...

5. Student Corey Hanifen spoke of not taking things for granted any longer and now realizing how precious things are. What things do you think he is referring to, and that we should not take for granted?

### Journal Writing Options:

1. Select one particular quote from a student or other speaker that had special meaning to you from the lesson and explain its meaningfulness to you.
2. Many Virginia Tech students said the events taught them to appreciate life and

not take it for granted. Write down a list of things you don't want to take for granted and why.

3. Has there been a time in your life where you or someone you know faced tragedy or loss? What was it? How did you react to this tragedy? How did those around the tragedy deal with the situation? Have you been able to move forward after the tragedy? If so, how? If not, why not? Extended Learning Activities:

#### **Extended Learning:**

1. With all the media attention to the motives, background of the shooter, encourage the class to learn more about the victims' individual stories. Have them read through the biographies of the fallen at [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com).
2. Lead a class discussion on whether it was right for the media to broadcast the killer's manifesto. List on the board reasons for and against.

#### **Internet Resources:**

"Pastor urges Virginia Tech Students, Faculty to Heal by Returning to Campus"

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-04-22-vt-services\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-04-22-vt-services_N.htm)

"Virginia Tech Students say School is Stronger in Wake of Massacre"

<http://www.nyjournalnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070422/NEWS02/704220365>

"Students Cope with Loss at Two-hour Convocation"

[http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/nation/ny-uscolo0418\\_0,925843.story](http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/nation/ny-uscolo0418_0,925843.story)

Courage Quotes:

[http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat\\_courage.html](http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_courage.html)



Romanian-born lecturer Liviu Librescu and wife Marlena are seen in an undated photo. (AP Photo, courtesy Librescu family)

**"Librescu's actions gave the students time to open widows and jump out of the classroom."**

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