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Before Gunfire, Hints of ‘Bad News’

By ERICA GOODE, SERGE F. KOVALESKI, JACK HEALY and DAN FROSCH

Published: August 26, 2012

AURORA, Colo. — The text message, sent to another graduate student in early July, was cryptic and worrisome. Had she heard of “dysphoric mania,” James Eagan Holmes wanted to know?

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Reuters, left; Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

James E. Holmes in 2006, left, and after his arrest last month in the movie theater shooting that left 12 dead.

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Bob Pearson/European Pressphoto Agency

Twelve people were killed and 58 were wounded in the July 20 shooting at the Century 16 Theater in Aurora.

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Alex Brandon/Associated Press

Mr. Holmes is accused of walking into the theater minutes after "The Dark Knight Rises" began, encased in body armor, setting off a gas canister and firing into the audience.



University of Colorado Medical School, via Associated Press

Dr. Lynne Fenton, a psychiatrist, treated Mr. Holmes.



Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

The third-floor apartment in Aurora where Mr. Holmes lived was found laced with deadly booby traps after the shooting during a midnight screening of “The Dark Knight Rises.”



Pool photo by RJ Sangosti

Mr. Holmes was arrested outside the theater after the attack.

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Matt Nager for The New York Times

Mr. Holmes, who faces 142 criminal counts in the Colorado theater shooting, captured the attention of shopkeepers in his neighborhood in Aurora.

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Matt Nager for The New York Times

“You kind of got that feeling that he was a loner,” said Vivian Andreu of Mr. Holmes.

Ms. Andreu works at Nick’s Liquors.

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Matt Nager for The New York Times

Mr. Holmes took his car for servicing at the Grease Monkey.

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Matt Nager for The New York Times

Mr. Holmes bought sunglasses at Mex Mall. He could often be seen on a BMX bike pedaling between his apartment and a University of Colorado campus, with a Subway sandwich bag dangling from the handlebars.

The psychiatric condition, a form of bipolar disorder, combines the frenetic energy of mania with the agitation, dark thoughts and in some cases paranoid delusions of major depression.

She messaged back, asking him if dysphoric mania could be managed with treatment. Mr. Holmes replied: “It was,” but added that she should stay away from him “because I am bad news.”

It was the last she heard from him.

About two weeks later, minutes into a special midnight screening of “The Dark Knight Rises” on July 20, Mr. Holmes, encased in armor, his hair tinted orange, a gas mask obscuring his face, stepped through the emergency exit of a sold-out movie theater here and opened fire. By the time it was over, there were 12 dead and 58 wounded.

The ferocity of the attack, its setting, its sheer magnitude — more people were killed and injured in the shooting than in any in the country’s history — shocked even a nation largely inured to random outbursts of violence.

But Mr. Holmes, 24, who was arrested outside the theater and has been charged in the shootings, has remained an enigma, his life and his motives cloaked by two court orders that have imposed a virtual blackout on information in the case and by the silence of the University of Colorado, Denver, where Mr. Holmes was until June a graduate student in neuroscience.

Unlike Wade M. Page, who soon after the theater shooting opened fire at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, killing six people, Mr. Holmes left no trail of hate and destruction behind him, no telling imprints in the electronic world, not even a Facebook page.

Yet as time has passed, a clearer picture has begun to surface. Interviews with more than a dozen people who knew or had contact with Mr. Holmes in the months before the attack paint a disturbing portrait of a young man struggling with a severe mental illness who more than once hinted to others that he was losing his footing.

Those who worked side by side with him saw an amiable if intensely shy student with a quick smile and a laconic air, whose quirky sense of humor surfaced in goofy jokes — “Take that to the bank,” he said while giving a presentation about an enzyme known as A.T.M. — and wry one-liners. There was no question that he was intelligent. “James is really smart,” one graduate student whispered to another after a

first-semester class. Yet he floated apart, locked inside a private world they could neither share nor penetrate.

He confided little about his outside life to classmates, but told a stranger at a nightclub in Los Angeles last year that he enjoyed taking LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. He had trouble making eye contact, but could make surprising forays into extroversion, mugging for the camera in a high school video. A former classmate, Sumit Shah, remembers an instance when Mr. Holmes performed Irish folk tunes on the piano — until others took notice of his playing, when he stopped. So uncommunicative that at times he seemed almost mute, he piped up enthusiastically in a hospital cafeteria line when a nearby conversation turned to professional football.

Like many of his generation, he was a devotee of role-playing video games like Diablo III and World of Warcraft — in 2009, he bought Neverwinter Nights II, a game like Dungeons & Dragons, on eBay, using the handle “sherlockbond” (“shipped with alacrity, great seller,” he wrote in his feedback on the sale). Rumored to have had a girlfriend, at least for a time, he appeared lonely enough in the weeks before the shooting to post a personal advertisement seeking companionship on an adult Web site.

Sometime in the spring, he stopped smiling and no longer made jokes during class presentations, his behavior shifting, though the meaning of the changes remained unclear. Packages began arriving at his apartment and at the school, containing thousands of rounds of ammunition bought online, the police say.

Prosecutors said in court filings released last week that Mr. Holmes told a fellow student in March that he wanted to kill people “when his life was over.”

In May, he showed another student a Glock semiautomatic pistol, saying he had bought it “for protection.” At one point, his psychiatrist, Dr. Lynne Fenton, grew concerned enough that she alerted at least one member of the university’s threat assessment team that he might be dangerous, an official with knowledge of the investigation said, and asked the campus police to find out if he had a criminal record. He did not. But the official said that nothing Mr. Holmes disclosed to Dr. Fenton rose to the threshold set by Colorado law to hospitalize someone involuntarily.

Yet Mr. Holmes was descending into a realm of darkness. In early June, he did poorly on his oral exams. Professors told him that he should find another career, prosecutors said at a hearing last week. Soon after, he left campus.

That Mr. Holmes, who is being held in the Arapahoe County jail awaiting arraignment on 142 criminal counts, deteriorated to the point of deadly violence cannot help but raise questions about the adequacy of the treatment he received and about the steps the university took or failed to take in dealing with a deeply troubled student. In court hearings and documents, Mr. Holmes's lawyers have confirmed that he has a mental disorder and that he was in treatment with Dr. Fenton. They will undoubtedly use any evidence that he was mentally ill in mounting a defense. Colorado is one of only a few states where, in an insanity defense, the burden of proof lies on the prosecution.

J. Reid Meloy, a forensic psychologist and expert on mass killers, has noted that almost without exception, their crimes represent the endpoint of a long and troubled highway that in hindsight was dotted with signs missed or misinterpreted. "These individuals do not snap," he said, "whatever that means."

But who could divine the capacity to shoot dozens of people in cold blood? Or the diabolical imagination necessary to devise the booby traps the police said Mr. Holmes carefully set out in his apartment the night of the rampage, devices that could have killed more?

### **Cool and Detached**

A potential for violence was the last thing that came to mind when a graduate student at the university met Mr. Holmes at a recruitment weekend for the neuroscience program in February last year.

"What struck me was that he was kind of nonchalant," the woman recalled. "He just seemed too cool to be there. He kicked back in his chair and seemed very relaxed in a very stressful situation."

But his reticence was also apparent, she said.

"I noticed that he was not engaged with people around him. We went around the table to introduce ourselves, and he made a weird, awkward joke," said the student who,

like many of those interviewed, spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing reasons that included not wanting their privacy invaded by other news organizations and hearing from law enforcement or university officials that talking publicly could compromise the investigation. The university, invoking the investigation and the court orders, has refused to release even mundane details about Mr. Holmes, like which professors he worked with.

As the fall term began last year and students plunged into their required coursework, that pairing of laconic ease with an almost crippling social discomfort would become a theme that many students later remembered.

The neuroscience program, which admits six or seven students each year out of 60 or more applicants, sits under the umbrella of the Center for Neuroscience, an interdisciplinary and multicampus enterprise started a little over year ago to bring together basic science and clinical research. More than 150 scientists are affiliated with the center, 60 of them formally involved with the graduate program.

The mix of laboratory scientists and clinicians is “absolutely fundamental” to the center’s goals, said Diego Restrepo, its director. Dr. Restrepo and two other administrators met with The New York Times under the ground rule that no specific questions about Mr. Holmes or the case be asked.

The research interests of the neuroscience faculty are wide-ranging and include the effects of aging on the sense of smell, the repair of spinal cord injuries, promising drugs for Down syndrome, treatments for stroke, and studies of diseases and disorders like Alzheimer’s, schizophrenia and autism. The center is particularly known for its research on the neurobiology of sensory perception.

In the first year of the program, each neuroscience graduate student takes required courses and completes three 12-week laboratory rotations, said Angie Ribera, the program’s director.

“Students might come in with a strong interest in one area, but we feel strongly that they should get broad training,” she said. “It’s an incredibly supportive group of students. There is a bonding there.”



Other students said Mr. Holmes did his rotations in the laboratories of Achim Klug, who studies the auditory system; Mark Dell’Acqua, who does basic research on synaptic signaling; and Dr. Curt Freed, whose work focuses on messenger chemicals in the brain and stem cell transplants in patients with Parkinson’s disease.

But even in a world where students can spend hours in solitary research, Mr. Holmes seemed especially alone.

He volunteered little information about himself, his interests or what he dreamed of doing with his degree, said one graduate student who, touched by Mr. Holmes’s shyness, tried repeatedly to draw him out. Attempts to engage him in small talk were met with an easy smile and a polite reply — if only a soft-spoken “yo” — but little more.

“He would basically communicate with me in one-word sentences,” one member of the neuroscience program said. “He always seemed to be off in his own world, which did not involve other people, as far as I could tell.”

In classes, Mr. Holmes arrived early to grab a good seat, his lanky 5-foot-11 frame in jeans and sometimes a “Star Wars” T-shirt. He hardly ever took notes, often staring into the distance as if daydreaming. Uncomfortable when called on by professors, he almost always began his responses with a weary-sounding “Uhhhhhhh.”

But there was little doubt about his intellect. In a grant-writing class, where students were required to grade each other’s proposals, Mr. Holmes wrote thoughtful and detailed comments, one student recalled, giving each paper he was assigned to review a generous grade.

“This was the only time I saw an assignment of James’s,” the student said. “Frankly, I was very impressed. I thought his comments were much better than anyone else’s.”

In the spring, just months before the shooting, Mr. Holmes turned in a midterm essay that a professor said was “spectacular,” written almost at the level of a professional in the field.

The essay was “beautifully written,” the professor said, and “more than I would have expected from a first-year student.”

In the talks Mr. Holmes gave after his first laboratory rotations, he often resorted to jokes, perhaps in an effort to cover his unease. During one presentation, he stood with one hand in his pocket, a laser pointer in his other hand. With a slight smile, he aimed the pointer at a slide and crowed “Oooooooooh!”

“Oh my God, James is so awkward,” a student recalled a classmate whispering.

Yet in a video of scenes from Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms,” made when he was a student at Westview High School in San Diego, where he was on the cross-country team and was a standout soccer defender, Mr. Holmes proved a deft comedian with a talent for improvisation, his former classmate Jared Bird remembered.

“He kept making funny faces at the camera and making unexpected comments,” Mr. Bird said. “He was being a goofy bartender. We expected him to play it straight, but he made it more interesting, much more comical. He ad-libbed everything.”

By the end of high school, Mr. Holmes was already pursuing his interest in science, attending a summer internship in 2006 at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego, before going to college at the University of California, Riverside. But if he was beginning the process of finding a career, he was also forging a reputation for extreme shyness.

“I frequently had to ask yes-or-no questions to get responses from him,” said John Jacobson, his adviser that summer, adding that he completed virtually none of the work he was assigned, which involved putting visual illusions developed in the laboratory on the Internet. “Communicating with James was difficult.”

Mr. Holmes was more voluble in e-mails. When he discovered that Mr. Jacobson spoke Mandarin, he began one e-mail to him with a greeting in that language: “Ni hao John.”

But he stayed apart from the other interns, often eating alone at his desk and not showing up for the regular afternoon teas. He was the only intern not to keep in touch with the coordinator when the program ended.

“At the end of the day, he would slink upstairs and leave,” Mr. Jacobson said.

### **A Notable Presence**

A smile and the air of one who walked a solitary path — they were enough to attract the attention of shopkeepers in the gritty neighborhood just west of the Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora, where students could find cheap, if amenity-free, housing.

On many days, Mr. Holmes could be seen cruising home slowly down 17th Avenue on his BMX bicycle toward the red-brick apartment building where he lived on the third floor, his body arched casually, his gangling frame almost too big for the small bike, a Subway sandwich bag dangling from the handlebars.

Waiters and sales clerks recognized him. He washed his clothes at a nearby laundry, took his car for servicing at the Grease Monkey, bought sunglasses at the Mex Mall and stopped in at a pawnshop on East Colfax Avenue, perusing the electronics and other goods for sale.

He favored a Mexican food truck in the mornings, buying three chicken and beef tacos but refusing sauce, and at night he sometimes dropped by Shepes's Rincon, a Latin club near his apartment, where he sat at the bar and drank three or four beers, a security guard there said. But he spoke no Spanish, and other than placing his order talked to no one.

On several occasions, he was spotted in the company of two other students, one male, one female. Did he date? No one seemed sure. Mostly, he was alone.

"You kind of got that feeling that he was a loner," said Vivian Andreu, who works at a local liquor store.

"Sometimes," she said, "I would get a smile out of him."

### **Months of Planning**

He had apparently planned the attack for months, stockpiling 6,000 rounds of ammunition he purchased online, buying firearms — a shotgun and a semiautomatic rifle in addition to two Glock handguns — and body armor, and lacing his apartment with deadly booby traps, the authorities have said.

But Mr. Holmes's neighbors did not seem to notice — Narender Dudee, who lived in an apartment next to his, did not even hear the loud techno music that blared from his rooms on the night of the shooting.

“I must have been in a deep sleep,” Mr. Dudee said.

Studies suggest that a majority of mass killers are in the grip of some type of psychosis at the time of their crimes, said Dr. Meloy, the forensic psychologist, and they often harbor delusions that they are fighting off an enemy who is out to get them. Yet despite their severe illness, they are frequently capable of elaborate and meticulous planning, he said.

As the graduate students reached the end of their second semester, wrapping up coursework, finishing lab rotations and looking toward the oral exam that would cap their first year, some noticed a change in Mr. Holmes. If possible, he seemed more isolated, more alone.

His smile and silly jokes were gone. The companions he had sometimes been seen with earlier in the year had disappeared.

On May 17, he gave his final laboratory presentation on dopamine precursors. The talks typically ran 15 minutes or so, but this time, Mr. Holmes spoke for only half that time. And while in earlier presentations he had made an attempt to entertain, this time he spoke flatly, as if he wanted only to be done with it.

A student with whom Mr. Holmes had flirted clumsily — he once sent her a text message after a class asking “Why are you distracting me with those shorts?” — said that two messages she received from him, one in June and the other in July, were particularly puzzling.

Their electronic exchanges had begun abruptly in February or March, when she was out with stomach flu.

“You still sick, girl?” she remembers Mr. Holmes asking.

“Who is this?” she shot back.

“Jimmy James from neuroscience,” he replied.

After that, she said, he sent her messages sporadically — once he asked her if she would like to go hiking — though he would sometimes walk right past her in the hallway, making no eye contact.

As the oral exams approached, she recalled, Mr. Holmes seemed relaxed about the prospect, telling her, “I will study everything or maybe I will study nothing at all.”

The goal of the one-hour exam, said Dr. Ribera, the neuroscience program director, “is to evaluate how students integrate information from their coursework and lab rotations and to see how they communicate on their feet.” It is not, she said, “to weed out or weed in.”

As is customary in many doctoral programs, three faculty members ask the questions during the exam. If a student does poorly, the orals can be repeated.

Mr. Holmes took his oral exam on June 7. The graduate student sent him a message the next day, asking how it had gone. Not well, he replied, “and I am going to quit.”

“Are you kidding me?” she asked.

“No, I am just being James,” he said.

A few weeks later, another student recalled, Cammie Kennedy, the neuroscience program administrator, accompanied the students to Cedar Creek Pub on campus to celebrate the completion of the first year. All the students except Mr. Holmes attended.

As the group drank beers and waxed nostalgic, Ms. Kennedy suddenly grew serious.

“I want to let you guys know that James has quit the program,” a student remembered her saying. “He wrote us an e-mail. He didn’t say why. That’s all I can really say.”

Mr. Holmes informed the school that he was dropping out at the same time that members of the threat assessment team were discussing Dr. Fenton’s concerns, the official familiar with the investigation said. Prosecutors in the case have said in court documents that Mr. Holmes was barred from the campus after making unspecified threats to a professor. But university administrators have insisted that he was not barred from campus and said his key card was deactivated on June 10 as part of the standard procedure for withdrawing.

In early July, the woman who conducted the text exchange with Mr. Holmes sent him a message to ask if he had left town yet. No, he wrote back, he still had two months remaining on his lease.

Soon he asked her about dysphoric mania.

Whether the diagnosis was his own or had been made by a mental health professional is unclear. Through a lawyer, Mr. Holmes's parents declined several requests to talk about their son's life before the shooting or the nature of any illness of his.

Dr. Victor Reus, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, said dysphoric mania is not uncommon in patients with bipolar disorder, a vast majority of whom never turn to violence.

But in severe cases, he said, patients can become highly agitated and caught up in paranoid delusions, reading meaning into trivial things, "something said on TV, something a passer-by might say, a bird flying by." Dr. Reus declined to speculate about Mr. Holmes, whom he has never met, and he emphasized that he knew nothing about the psychiatric treatment Mr. Holmes might have received.

But he said that in some cases psychiatrists, unaware of the risks, prescribe antidepressants for patients with dysphoric mania — drugs that can make the condition worse.

Dave Aragon, the director of the low-budget movie "Suffocator of Sins," a Batman-style story of vigilante justice and dark redemption, remembers receiving two phone calls in late May or early June from a man identifying himself as James Holmes from Denver. The caller had become enraptured with the four-minute online trailer for the movie, Mr. Aragon said — "He told me he'd watched it 100 times" — and had pressed him for more details about the film.

"He came off as articulate, nervous, on the meek side," he said. "He was obviously interested in the body count."

### **Painful Retrospect**

In the days after the shooting, faculty members and graduate students, in shock, compared notes on what they knew about Mr. Holmes, what they might have missed, what they could have done. Some said they wished they had tried harder to break through his loneliness, a student recalled. Others wondered if living somewhere besides the dingy apartment on Paris Street might have mitigated his isolation.

At a meeting held at Dr. Ribera's house, a student said, Barry Shur, the dean of the graduate school, said Mr. Holmes had been seeing a psychiatrist. When the authorities

told him the identity of the shooting suspect, Dr. Shur said, his reaction was “I’ve heard his name before.”

But all that came later.

No one saw Mr. Holmes much after he left school in June.

A classmate spotted him once walking past the Subway on campus, his backpack in tow. Mr. Dudee, his neighbor, saw him in mid-July, his hair still its normal brown. Perhaps in a sign of ambivalence, he never took the forms he had filled out to the graduate dean’s office, the final step in withdrawing from the university.

He never replied to the fellow student’s last text message, asking if he wanted to talk about dysphoric mania.

At some point on Thursday, July 19, according to the police, he gathered up the bullets and shotgun shells, the gas mask, an urban assault vest, a ballistic helmet and a groin protector and moved into action at the Century 16 Theater.

He mailed a notebook to Dr. Fenton that the university said arrived on July 23, its contents still under seal by the court. And he bought a ticket for the midnight premiere of “The Dark Knight Rises,” as if he were just another moviegoer, looking forward to the biggest hit of the summer.

*Sheelagh McNeill, Kitty Bennett and Jack Styczynski contributed research.*