

## Conditional sentence for school threat

*Hamilton Spectator*  
(May 5, 2007)

His psychologist says Helmut Contreras is a changed person a year after being arrested for making e-mail threats to shoot a female friend along with other students and staff of St. Jean de Brebeuf high school.

Hamilton police considered the 19-year-old student a Columbine copycat when they charged Contreras on April 21, 2006 with uttering a death threat and breaching his probation.

Even after his release on bail on strict terms of house arrest, Hamilton police took the threatened shooting spree extremely seriously and implemented a city-wide strategy to beef up security at local high schools.

Contreras, now 20, pleaded guilty to the charges on April 11 this year.

He was convicted just five days before Seung Hui Cho, a mentally deranged student from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., opened fire on campus, killing 32 students and staff and wounding many more before committing suicide.

The Virginia Tech tragedy and Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colo. in 1999 were clearly on the minds of Ontario Court Justice Anton Zuraw and the lawyers involved in Contreras's sentencing yesterday.

Zuraw accepted a joint recommendation from the defence and Crown for a 15-month conditional sentence and two years of probation. The community supervision order would allow Contreras outside his home only three hours a day for the first three months, then gradually lessen restrictions on his freedom.

"A crime like this strikes a chord with the entire community because at many schools and workplaces such threats as this have become a reality and many innocents have died," said Zuraw.

Defence lawyer Beth Bromberg filed a psychological report from Dr. Jeffrey Wong, who said Contreras had matured while under house arrest.

He said Contreras did not suffer from a major mental illness and does not exhibit any symptoms of depression, anxiety or psychosis.

Wong said Contreras no longer kept his feelings bottled up inside and now appreciated the support of his family.

"There is no evidence of any difficulties with feelings of frustration or anger," noted Wong.

Bromberg said the school-shooting fantasy had started out as a joke among Contreras and a few friends, but became a threat and act of intimidation after a female friend hurt his feelings.

"Teenagers should remember that when they're talking to people in e-mails, Facebook or MSN, they are talking to real people who will take what they say seriously.

"You have to be careful what you say. In terms of the law, if you make a threat, even if you have no intention of ever following through, you are guilty of a criminal offence."

Bromberg said Contreras was having difficulties at the time dealing with unresolved grief for his mother, who died from a lingering illness. He had recently suffered another loss when a close friend died of leukemia.

"At first it was a bunch of kids who were just joking, but ultimately he turned it into a threat and that's when it became a crime," said Bromberg.

The female student told a teacher about Contreras's threatening e-mail and the information was passed along to police.

According to rumours at the school, the shootings were to take place June 6, 2006 -- a date synonymous with 666, the occult symbol for the antichrist, also known as the sign of the devil.

After interviewing students and staff, police executed a search warrant at Contreras's home. They seized a number of items from his bedroom, including a satanic bible, two cap guns, a chef's knife, a handwritten report on the Columbine massacre and a hand-drawn map of St. Jean de Brebeuf school, showing its floor plan and exits.

Assistant Crown attorney Andrew Bell said, although the threatened school shooting never went beyond a statement of intention, it was not merely impulsive. He said the plan was worked out and discussed among Contreras and his friends over a period of time.

"It was not a joke to the student who reported the threat. It was not a joke to school administrators and it was not a joke to the Hamilton Police Service," said Bell.

[bbrown@thespec.com](mailto:bbrown@thespec.com) (mailto:bbrown@thespec.com)

905-526-3494