Young mathematicians prevail in tragic circumstances

Tuesday April 20, 1999, was the gravest day in the history of Colorado. The tragic shooting at Columbine High School near Denver left many students and a teacher dead, others wounded. It shocked every one of us. I was torn by a moral dilemma: should I cancel the Colorado Mathematical Olympiad, scheduled for the coming Friday? Columbine often participated. Last year Columbine’s junior John Batchelder won first prize. Was he OK? If not, I felt, then cancellation was a must. If he were OK, what would he prefer, a cancellation in solidarity with Columbine’s tragedy or holding the Olympiad as a symbol that we were down but not out?

All evening the phone circuits were understandably busy. Late at night I got through. John was somber but physically unharmed. He said he would come on Friday to UCCS for the Olympiad. “OK, John, then we’ll hold it.” was my reply.

The following morning, on April 21, 1999, at 9:32 A.M., I sent an e-mail to all professors of my university asking them to join me and volunteer to teach at Columbine High School. My e-mail was entitled “Teaching Aid for Columbine High”:

The gravest day of Colorado ... 
What can we do for Columbine High?
Teachers were shot...
We can form a list of those who wouldn’t mind to come to Columbine and teach on some days until the end of this school year.

We will offer them a list of faculty in English, History, Philosophy, Foreign Languages, PE, Math, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, Computers, Econ., Art, Music, etc., etc. – and they will choose what they need.

Do let me know if you would volunteer.
If you are a department secretary, please, talk to faculty who do not use e-mail and let me know.
I will compile a list of teaching aid that UCCS can offer.

Today the school is closed.
I will talk later today to the district and John Batchelder and his father, and tomorrow to the principal ... if he is OK ...

Yours,
Alexander Soifer

A number of my fellow professors volunteered right away: Mike Ciletti of Electrical Engineering, Douglas Swartzendruber of Biology, Rick Wunderli of History, Kelli Klebe of Psychology, Terry Engel of English, Perrin Cunningham of Philosophy. I forwarded the list to the school district (the school was closed) right away, and to John Batchelder. He replied the same night of April 21, 1999, at 11:46 P.M.:

I am very grateful that there are people like you who show their concern to all those impacted by the tragic event at Columbine High School. I have received over one hundred e-mails from people throughout the United States, Canada, and even one from a high school student in Israel, all wishing to show their support to the victims of the incident. It is refreshing to know that there are people who not only feel sympathy towards the impacted individuals, but also put great effort into showing their concerns to the students and faculty of Columbine.

Sincerely,
John Batchelder
Columbine High School senior

Thursday April 22, 1999, brought a snowstorm throughout the State and made the cancellation of the Olympiad a possibility again. UCCS