

EXCLUSIVE

The making of an alleged school shooter: Missed warnings and years of neglect

Interviews with family members, along with a review of private texts and public documents, open a window on a 14-year-old's path to alleged gunman at Georgia's Apalachee High School.

29 min 3012



(Chelsea Conrad/The Washington Post; AP/Brynn Anderson; Courtesy of Debbie Polhamus; Jackson County Sheriff's Office; Audra Melton)

WINDER, Ga. — Three weeks before Colt Gray became the youngest alleged mass school shooter in a quarter century, his grandmother told him to hide in his bedroom and shut the door.

He had called his grandmother because, he told her, his mother was angry and “acting weird again.” His mom had struck him in the past, the grandmother said, recounting the episode to The Washington Post. This time, she said, the 14-year-old decided to confront his mother when she stepped through the doorway.

He reached for the AR-style rifle his dad had bought him for Christmas, family members said, using the gun to shove her out of the bedroom and into a wall in the hallway.

He made a plea to his grandmother that day.

“I really need you to get my mother out of this house,” he said, according to the grandmother. Later, she would identify that as the moment Colt stopped believing his life would get better.

By then, family members said, Colt was [adrift](#) in a childhood ravaged by violence and addiction and overlooked by a system that failed to pull him out of it. His grandmother, Debbie Polhamus, had for years prodded schools, counselors and caseworkers to help him. None of it had been enough.



People walk near the scene of the shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder, Ga., on Sept. 4, when four people were killed and several others injured. (Erik S Lesser/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

On Sept. 4, according to authorities, the teen [used his rifle](#) to kill two students and two teachers at Apalachee High School here in Winder, exposing yet another community to America’s epidemic of campus gun violence. The next day, in this small city just beyond the Atlanta suburbs, his father became the first parent of an alleged school shooter to be [charged](#) with murder.

The spiraling path that led Colt to a jail cell offers an extraordinary case study on the making of yet another young man accused of gunning down children in their classrooms and hallways — a story, like so many before it, of neglect, dysfunction and missed or ignored warnings. This account of the circumstances that preceded last

month's bloodshed is based on interviews with family members and officials as well as a review of private messages, police documents and school records.

Over three years, institutions charged with protecting children and the wider public encountered Colt in times of crisis but did not prevent the violence that would follow, The Post examination found. In these moments, Colt and his family interacted with Georgia child welfare workers, four school systems, three county sheriffs departments and two local police agencies.

Though state caseworkers had long monitored his family, Colt did not attend any school during the academic year prior to the shooting, The Post found.

Colt's parents, each addicted to drugs and alcohol, were perpetually inattentive, often cruel and sometimes entirely absent, according to family members, neighbors, investigators, police reports and court records. In one episode last fall, Colt's mother, who was high on methamphetamine, declared that she was going to kill him, Polhamus said, adding that the remark haunted the teen for months.

He grew increasingly paranoid over this past summer, family members said, and talked in recent weeks about hurting himself or others. In a potentially critical moment of inaction days before the shooting, the examination found, Colt's father failed to take him to an inpatient clinic the teen described as his last chance of getting help.

On the morning of the shooting, Colt asked in his first-period class how Apalachee High would respond to an active shooter, according to two people briefed on the events. A teacher reported the comment to school administrators, setting off a scramble to find him that instead led security to apprehend the wrong student — an older teen with a nearly identical name.

Colt Gray has been [charged](#) as an adult with four counts of murder. His attorney declined to comment.

Attorneys for his father, Colin Gray, 54, also declined to comment for this story and did not respond to a list of specific questions.

His mother, Marcee Gray, 43, who served jail time last year for a family violence offense, denied threatening to kill her son and told The Post she has a good relationship with him. She suggested that her mother, Polhamus, had limited insight into Colt's life and that the argument involving the gun had little effect on him.

In interviews over many hours, Marcee said she hoped people would see her son as something other than a monster. She acknowledged that she has long struggled with

drug addiction but said she has been sober for nearly a year. She rejected the idea that her behavior contributed to his mental health decline or to the massacre at Apalachee.

“I feel a lot of guilt,” Marcee told The Post, “but I do not feel like I have any fault in what happened.”

Polhamus, 74, and Colt’s aunt Annie Brown, 37, also spoke at length with The Post, saying they are consumed with regret. The women provided documents, emails and text exchanges to corroborate their accounts. Polhamus and Brown said they hope the story of what led to this shooting, and all that was missed before it, might stop the next one.

“I failed Colt. I mean, I’ll be the first to admit it,” Polhamus said. If she had done more at key moments, she said, “those other kids wouldn’t be dead. And he wouldn’t be facing life in prison.”

Colt had talked at home about his fascination with school shootings for more than a year, his mother said, before the day last month when, amid the gunfire, children and staff huddled in darkened classrooms, weeping and texting goodbyes.



From left, math teacher Cristina Irimie, students Christian Angulo and Mason Schermerhorn, and teacher and football coach Richard Aspinwall all lost their lives in the shooting at Apalachee High School in Georgia last month. (Apalachee High School, Teo Armus/The Washington Post, Family photo, Apalachee High School)

Now, hundreds of them must contend with memories of the deadliest school shooting in Georgia history.

Seven are scarred with bullet wounds.

And [four](#) are dead: math teacher Cristina Irimie, 53, teacher and football coach Richard Aspinwall, 39, and Mason Schermerhorn and Christian Angulo, both 14-year-old freshmen.

Early brushes with authorities

One day in August 2021, just after Colt had started sixth grade, family members said, he searched the internet for ideas on how to kill his father.

At the time, the Grays were living near Marcee's parents in Fitzgerald, a small town in rural southern Georgia. Colin, a construction worker, had gotten hooked on pain pills years earlier after back surgery, Marcee told The Post, acknowledging that she, too, picked up the habit. Colin was unemployed, family members said, as he labored through withdrawals and often yelled at his oldest son.

Colt, then 11, was flagged for conducting the search on a school device, either a computer or tablet. Marcee said a school counselor called, and two school resource officers showed up to speak with her and Colt. She said she doesn't know if they made a report and she never heard from them again.

Marcee told The Post she treated it like a joke but didn't tell her husband for more than a year because she was concerned he would take it out on Colt.

The Ben Hill County school district declined to comment, and the sheriff's office, which oversees the resource officer program, said it couldn't find an incident report.



An undated family photo shows a young Colt Gray with his grandmother Debbie Polhamus. (Courtesy of Debbie Polhamus)

Polhamus, who taught in public schools for decades, said she talked to her grandson at the time about his internet search, which he brushed off as messing around. She had long known how much his parents' behavior affected him, she said, but the online query was the first time she remembers law enforcement taking note of her grandson's anger.

The next authorities to enter his life came from child services, looking for Marcee after the first of at least five calls from people who told The Post that they reported their suspicions of child abuse and neglect by her or her husband.

In September 2021, almost three years to the day before the shooting at Apalachee, Polhamus decided to report her daughter to the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services. Marcee had exploded during an argument that started over chicken strips from Dairy Queen, striking Colt a half-dozen times, according to Polhamus, who was in the house at the time. She and Brown, her other daughter, each spoke to the state child welfare agency.

At the agency's request, the family said, Colt temporarily moved in with Polhamus and Marcee began regular drug testing.

Marcee told The Post she couldn't recall details of the incident but said Colt recanted his allegations a few weeks later. "He felt scared and attacked," she texted her mother at the time, "so he focused all the blame towards his strongest supporter (me)."

Concerned that the caseworker didn't have all the facts and wasn't taking the matter seriously, Brown offered in October 2021 to provide additional evidence of abuse by her sister, according to an email reviewed by The Post. In a brief reply, the caseworker did not acknowledge the offer but said the family was receiving "services for the issues identified."

Georgia requires county child welfare agencies to notify law enforcement of allegations of abuse or neglect, experts say, though some jurisdictions stray from those rules because they field so many cases. The Fitzgerald Police Department told The Post it was never contacted about the allegations against Marcee in 2021.

The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services declined to answer questions about this case, citing privacy laws.

Colin took a new job in late 2021, Marcee said, and the couple moved their kids 200 miles north to Jackson County, near Winder. Far from Fitzgerald, their addictions again flourished, Marcee said, leading to one eviction after another.

In a period of five years, Colt attended at least six schools in five districts, education records show. Schools are one of the institutions where adults are most likely to notice abused or neglected children if, researchers say, staff gets the chance to know them.

At home, his parents often screamed at and slapped each other in public, said a neighbor, Lauren Vickers. She said she once saw Marcee collapse to the ground in a stupor after driving with a young child in the car. One day, Vickers said, she glimpsed inside their home and saw trash but hardly any furniture.

On Halloween night in 2022, Marcee erupted, Vickers said, striking Colt and his sister and locking them out in the cold. The kids cried. They banged on the door. Around 11 p.m., Vickers said, Marcee let them back inside.

Marcee adamantly denied all of Vickers's claims.

The day after Halloween, Vickers called the county office of the state child welfare agency, one of four such calls she said she made. Each time, the person who answered the phone promised the agency would “look into it,” she said. Twice, a caseworker came to the neighborhood and interviewed her, Vickers said, before walking next door and entering the Grays' home.



Colt Gray wrote this message on the bathroom wall of the home in Fitzgerald, Ga., where he and his family lived on and off over the last several years. (Sarah Blaskey)

In November of that year, Marcee and Colin separated. She moved away with their two younger children, family members said, and Colt decided to stay in Jackson County with his father. Vickers said two of her calls to child welfare workers came in the winter of 2023, after Marcee moved away, once because Colt appeared unwashed and was wandering the neighborhood during school hours and once because Marcee had returned and Vickers worried she might harm the children.

Colt, then in seventh grade, was suffering relentless bullying at school, according to Vickers, whose daughter rode the bus with him. The girl saw other children taunt Colt about body odor and throw bottles of dry shampoo at him. The harassment became so severe in the spring of 2023 that his grandmother said she called the school with a plea to let him eat lunch alone.

Around that time, Marcee said, Colt immersed himself in a new interest: school shooters. He learned their names, how many people they killed, what their childhoods were like. Marcee said she didn't think much of it, comparing her interest in true-crime stories to her son's infatuation with young men who shot children dead in the places they went to learn.

'im committing a mass shooting'

Colt, eyes low and hands in his pockets, swayed nervously on the front porch. He wore a baseball cap and baggy sweatpants. His feet were bare.

"Did you say something about a school shooting?" Daniel Miller, a deputy with the Jackson County Sheriff's Office, asked Colt on that Sunday afternoon in May 2023, according to body-cam footage.

"Never," the 13-year-old said, his voice quiet. "I swear."

A day earlier, records show, the FBI received messages about a profane, homophobic Discord user whose handle, written in Russian, was the last name of the gunman who killed 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012. The person had [threatened](#) to open fire at a school — and shared images of an AR-style rifle and a shotgun.

"im committing a mass shooting," one message read.

"i need ideas for where to shoot," read another.

And, on a post with a picture of the two guns leaned against a wall: "I'm ready."

The FBI traced the email address behind the Discord account to Colt and notified the sheriff's office the next day, leading to the front porch interview. Colin answered the

door in his underwear, then summoned his son. Miller, the deputy, was joined by a patrolman, Justin Elliott.

Miller conducted the interview without having seen the most critical evidence — screenshots of the Discord chat and those photos of the guns. He would later note in his report that the evidence was in an email attachment that he couldn't figure out how to open on his phone while at the house.

Colt promised he didn't write the threats, and Miller suggested that was good enough for him.

"I gotta take you at your word," he said.

In their conversation with Colin, he told them he'd never heard of Discord.



A still taken from a Jackson County sheriff's body camera shows Colt Gray, second from left, answering questions about profane messages relating to a Discord account as his father, Colin Gray, is seated at right. (Jackson County Sheriff's Office)

Miller's report stated that Colin said Colt was allowed to use the guns "when supervised but does not have unfettered access to them."

Colin did tell officers Colt had access to his unloaded guns, but he was not asked how he stored ammunition or about supervision, the footage shows. He made clear that if investigators found that his son had made the threats, "all the guns will go away and they won't be accessible to him."

In a follow-up call two days later, Miller told Colin the FBI tip had left him baffled, according to a recording, and that he had no “reasonable suspicions about Colt.”

Then he closed the case, without having asked to compare the images posted online with Colin’s guns or to see inside the home. The carpet, wall color and trim in the photos shared by the Discord user appear consistent with images from online real estate listings that show the interior of the house Colt lived in at the time, according to a Post review.

Miller did not respond to messages seeking comment.

“This really was a missed opportunity to probe deeper into what appeared to be a highly credible tip,” said Jacinta Gau, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Central Florida.

At the time, the sheriff’s office informed the FBI in an email that deputies had alerted area schools about the threat and would continue to monitor Colt, records show. After the shooting at Apalachee High more than a year later, though, Sheriff Janis Mangum said publicly that she couldn’t find any evidence that schools had, in fact, been notified of the 2023 threat.

Mangum defended the investigation in an interview, asserting that “there wasn’t enough evidence to sustain a charge,” but Elliott, the patrolman, has come to believe that they could have done more. Now an investigator in the department, Elliott told The Post he was asked to accompany Miller but never received access to the FBI tip and did not know about the images.

“In hindsight, it was possible to bring those photos to the dad and say ‘Do you recognize these?’” said Elliott, a father and Army veteran. “I do think it could have been done differently.”

Making terroristic threats against a school is a felony in Georgia. If the 13-year-old had been charged, experts said, a court could have prohibited him from living in a home where he had access to a firearm.

Drug-induced episode leaves family reeling

In the fall of 2023, a few weeks after he should have started eighth grade, Colt briefly moved back to Fitzgerald, in southern Georgia, to live with his mom, just as Marcee — by her own account — took up meth.

He had not started school before the move, records show. And while Marcee promised to let him enroll in online classes when he arrived, she acknowledged that she never finished registering him.

Marcee, who admitted that her drug use triggered Colt, said he came back to Fitzgerald a “different person,” bullying his siblings and breaking windows around the house.

On Oct. 3, after an argument that began when Marcee tried to use his phone, he slashed furniture with a knife, family members said. His grandfather called police, who took an incident report but didn’t arrest Colt. The Fitzgerald police also described the incident to The Post and confirmed the date.

By mid-October, Colt had moved to Winder to live with his dad, and child services made a surprise visit and drug-tested Marcee. She failed, she and other family members said, and a caseworker ordered Colin to immediately retrieve his other two children.

“She told him that if he hadn’t come down to get the kids, they were going into foster care,” Colt’s aunt, Brown, texted a family member days later, explaining that Colt overheard the caseworker read the test results to Colin: “alcohol, hydrocodone, OxyContin, meth, adderall.”

Marcee told The Post she tested positive only for oxycodone and meth.

Colin took the kids back north to Winder, according to Marcee, who objected, texting the caseworker that her husband was “a documented physical abuser of his children.”

Soon after, Marcee said she was told her case had been closed.

By then, she said, Colin had cut off her contact with their kids.



Colin Gray, shown here entering Barrow County Courthouse on Sept. 6, became the first parent of an alleged school shooter to be charged with murder. (Brynn Anderson/AP)

On Nov. 3, 2023, Marcee showed up at her parents' home in southern Georgia, high on meth and fixated on revenge against the husband she believed had stolen her kids, Polhamus said. Marcee wanted her mother to drive with her four hours north to Winder so she could kill Colin, Polhamus would later tell police. When she refused, Polhamus said, Marcee threw her into a wall and forced her to sit on a chair, restraining her with white tape as her arm bled.

Before Marcee walked out, Polhamus told The Post her daughter delivered a final message: "I'm going to kill Colt, just for you."

Polhamus, left bound and alone for 22 hours, was rescued after Brown, her other daughter, couldn't reach her and sent a neighbor to check on her. The neighbor freed Polhamus, contacted police and texted Brown, describing the alleged threat against Colt. The Post reviewed the message.

Polhamus did not mention the remark when police arrived. Her omission wasn't intentional, she told The Post, but she didn't believe Marcee would harm her grandson anyway.

After leaving her mother, police records indicate, Marcee drove to Winder in a car with plates taken from another vehicle. At around 8 a.m. the next day, police and family said, she banged on the door where Colin and the kids lived, but he refused to let her inside. She then keyed his pickup, according to police, carving "abuse" into the side.

Two days later, police say they found Marcee at a nearby Walmart. She had covered her Nissan Rogue in what she described as suicide notes, scribbled in green paint and black marker.

"All I wanted was a f---ing hug from my 2 BABIES," she had scrawled on the steering wheel, naming her two youngest children but not Colt.

Marcee was charged with a family violence offense and immediately jailed for the events in Winder, and she would later be indicted on separate charges, including false imprisonment, down south in Fitzgerald. She would eventually plead guilty in the Winder case. Sentenced to time served in December, she would remain in custody for several more months on the charges in the Fitzgerald case, which are still pending.

After the shooting at Apalachee High drew scrutiny of her past, Marcee released a statement to [media](#) expressing regret and saying she tied her mother to a chair "while experiencing a methamphetamine-induced psychosis and under the false belief that my children were in grave danger." She made the trip to Winder, she said, to check on her kids.

She remembers little of the incident, Marcee told The Post, but said she never threatened her son and did not hurt her mother. She said her failure to mention Colt in the suicide notes had no meaning, adding that she wasn't thinking straight.

Within a few days of the November incident, Colin texted Brown that when Marcee eventually got out of jail she would "try to finish what she started." He shared those fears with his children, too, the family said, warning them to watch out for their mother and keep the door locked. He also told Colt that his mom had threatened to murder him, Polhamus said, a notion her grandson obsessed over.

"Do you really think that my mom would kill me?" he would often ask, Polhamus said.

She always told him no, she said, but she's not sure he believed her.

That Christmas, a law enforcement official confirmed, Colt's dad decided to buy him a present: his own AR-style rifle.

A lost year

In January, for his 14th birthday, Colt asked Polhamus to buy ammunition for his new gun. Unaware that he had been flagged by the FBI eight months earlier, Polhamus told The Post, she agreed on the condition that Colin keep the rounds somewhere safe and use them to spend time with his son at the shooting range.

Polhamus said she doesn't think they ever went.

"Colt was like the thrown-away child," she said.

By then, she said, Colt had started searching the internet for what was wrong with him. Polhamus said his father didn't sign him up for therapy, even when she offered to pay and drive him to appointments.

Weeks into the spring semester, Colt still hadn't attended any of eighth grade, according to Polhamus and Brown, who said they submitted paperwork on Colin's behalf to the Barrow County School System. Records show he was registered on Feb. 2 at Haymon-Morris Middle School.

But Colt didn't go.

"We'll let you slide for a few days," Colin told his son, according to Polhamus. District records indicate he never attended.

Polhamus and Brown each said they called the middle school, demanding support. "I need you to be aware that he's not coming to school," Polhamus recalled telling a staff member who, she said, assured her that the school would "take care of it."



A candlelight vigil is held in Winder, Ga., on Sept. 6, two days after Colt Gray allegedly opened fire at Apalachee High School and killed four people. (Elijah Nouvelage/Reuters)

Under Georgia law, school districts must intervene if a student has been absent for an extended period and, if necessary, refer the matter to the courts. If a student withdraws from school and does not re-enroll elsewhere, the district must notify state child welfare officials.

The Barrow County School System declined to answer questions about what efforts, if any, staff made to get Colt into class, citing student privacy laws. They said that under state rules a student must attend at least one day of school to be considered enrolled.

Colt was not registered as a home-schooled student in eighth grade, according to state authorities. Officials at four online statewide schools confirmed to The Post that Colt had not enrolled.

In July, with a new school year approaching, Polhamus said she called the middle school yet again, assuming her grandson would need to repeat eighth grade. But she said a staffer insisted that, despite his long absence, Colt would have to start ninth grade at Apalachee High.

In response to questions about why he was placed in ninth grade, the school system said, in general, students arriving without “transferrable records” are put in the grade level that’s appropriate for their age.

At the time, Polhamus said, she told the school staffer that their decision to place Colt in high school did not make sense, because he hadn’t attended a single day of classes the previous year.

Signs of growing paranoia

One evening in late August, Colt's grandmother was driving him to a McDonald's near Winder when she said he mentioned Nikolas Cruz. Polhamus didn't know who that was, so she said Colt explained. Cruz had shot dead 17 people on a campus in Parkland, Fla., in 2018, when Colt was 8.

Polhamus was alarmed. She believed Colt's mental health had deteriorated since his mother returned home in July, having made bail and done a stint in rehab. Despite telling his kids for months that their mother was a threat, Colin had allowed her to move back in with them.

At Colt's urging, Polhamus said, she took Marcee back south to live in Fitzgerald the day after Colt raised his gun to push her away from his bedroom. By then, according to Polhamus, Colt had started showing signs of extreme paranoia, worrying that strangers were watching him whenever he left the house.

Marcee said Colt's decline preceded her return from rehab. After the altercation with Colt, she said, she began urging Colin to lock up his guns. Her husband was reluctant to take Colt's rifle away, she said, because he worried about how the teen might react.

Not until two weeks into his freshman year was Colt enrolled at Apalachee, on Aug. 14, records show. He often refused to go to classes, and on one of the few days he did attend, Polhamus said he had a panic attack and called her from the counselor's office convinced that his teachers were talking about him. Later, his grandmother said, he confessed that he'd thought about harming himself and other people.



Alantis Hunter, an 18-year-old senior at Apalachee High, has struggled to eat and sleep since the shooting. (Audra Melton for The Washington Post)

Polhamus, whose sister had killed herself years earlier, spotted a familiar pattern of delusion. On Aug. 27, eight days before the shooting, she said she called a behavioral health crisis center near Winder and asked how to admit her grandson. A parent had to do it, the staffer told her, but his dad could bring him Saturday, when he wasn't working.

The next day, Polhamus drove to Apalachee and, she said, demanded to meet with Colt's counselor, sharing deep concern for her grandson's mental health and the possibility that he might hurt himself. Polhamus said she didn't think to say anything — and was also never asked — about Colt's rifle or the other guns in Colin's home, an oversight she now regrets.

Polhamus explained her plan to admit him at the crisis center, she said, and the counselor suggested that Colt first meet the next day with a therapist at the school.

His grandmother walked out encouraged. Then, in a moment of random misfortune, she tripped on the sidewalk that led to the parking lot, breaking four fingers.

The injury, which required surgery, meant she would have to leave early the next day to see her doctor near Fitzgerald — before she could ensure that Colt met with the therapist. She said she begged her grandson to board the bus that Thursday morning. He never did.

Polhamus turned her focus to Colin. He could still admit Colt to the crisis center on Saturday, she told him, when he was off work.

The weekend came, then it went, and his son remained at home.

In a text to his mom that Monday, the teen described the missed Saturday intake at the crisis center as his last chance to get help.

His grandmother talked to him the next day, Sept. 3, after he skipped school again.

"You're going to have to go," she recalled telling him, hopeful that there, he could find the support he never did at home.

"I know, Mamoo," he replied, according to Polhamus. "I'm going to go tomorrow. I've made up my mind."

The hours before the shooting

On the morning of Wednesday, Sept. 4, another student said, Colt was the last one on the bus.

"Can I sit here?" he asked a girl, according to the nearby senior, who said Colt waited awkwardly in the aisle until she made space for him.

On the ride in, the senior said, he held his backpack on his lap.

At 8:37 a.m., his father texted a family group chat, according to one of more than a dozen messages from that morning reviewed by The Post.

“Well k keep your fingers crossed,” he wrote, explaining that Colt had taken the bus to school. “let’s pray he has a good day.”

In first period, Colt’s teacher heard him ask how Apalachee responds to active shooters and noticed that he had an unusually heavy bag, according to a person close to the investigation and another person briefed by school leaders, both speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential matters.

The teacher was alarmed, they said, and alerted other staff in an email.

Colt carried his rifle in the bag, according to the two people. One said Colt obscured the gun in a rolled-up poster, and the other said he used a poster tube.

Between classes, Colt texted his father.

“I’m sorry,” he wrote at 9:42 a.m. “it’s not ur fault.”

“What’s wrong Bubba? U didn’t do anything???” Colin replied. “Hey?? What’s wrong.”

Colt told his dad he loved him and his brother and sister.

“ur not to blame,” he continued. “for any of it.”



The rented home in Winder, Ga., where Colt Gray lived with his father. (Audra Melton for The Washington Post)

Colin immediately called Polhamus, who was with Marcee at the time, family members said. Unnerved, he described the messages from Colt. Marcee called her son, but he didn't pick up.

"Hope you're okay Coltie - text me and let me know you're good," she wrote, along with a heart emoji.

Colt's second period started at 9:45 a.m., but his algebra teacher hadn't been warned about his troubling comments, so when he asked for a pass to see the counselor, she gave it to him, according to the two people briefed on the matter. By happenstance, they said, a student in the same class — with the same last name and nearly the same first — asked for a pass to leave around the same time. They said both teens made their way to the same bathroom.

School resource officers, alerted to the threatening comments, converged on that bathroom and ordered "Colt Gray" to come out, the two people said, but the wrong student appeared. The officers didn't realize their mistake until after they escorted him back to the front office.

Marcee [called](#) the school at 9:50 a.m. and was on the line for 10 minutes, according to phone records. She said she spoke with Colt's counselor, describing the text messages and calling it an "extreme emergency." She asked that school staff locate her son right away, according to both Marcee and Polhamus, who overheard the call.

"I'm sorry," Colt texted his mother at 10:02 a.m.

Colt would later tell her from jail, she said, that when he was hiding in a bathroom stall, a staff member came in and asked for "Gray" — then left as the teen remained silent.

What happened over the 20 minutes following Marcee's call remains unclear, but the person briefed by school leaders said that, after Apalachee staff discovered their misidentification, they immediately restarted the search.

At 10:18 a.m., his mother texted his father, suggesting he leave work: "They're going to need you at the school."

Minutes later, their son was standing in the hallway, the gun in his hand.

Mary Ann Anderson, Teo Armus, Holly Bailey, Alice Crites, Monika Mathur and Razzan Nakhlawi contributed to this report.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2024/10/03/georgia-school-shooting-suspect-apalachee/>