

# TURNING A SHOVEL INTO TEARS

*A day gone wrong was actually a day gone right*

**Dr. Scott Seaman**

*Executive Director, AWSP*

**The crackle** of the radio was rarely good news, and today's urgent all-channel broadcast was no different. "There's an angry student who took a shovel from the greenhouse and is swinging wildly at anyone who comes near him in the courtyard," was the panicked message from the high school front office.

As principal, I remember changing courses immediately from wherever my previous mission was taking me and began running straight toward the courtyard. While at the same time I was yelling back at the radio, "Call the police! I'm on my way!"

I also remember doing the math on how close we were to a passing period and thinking the math was not in my favor. Should I call for a lockdown?

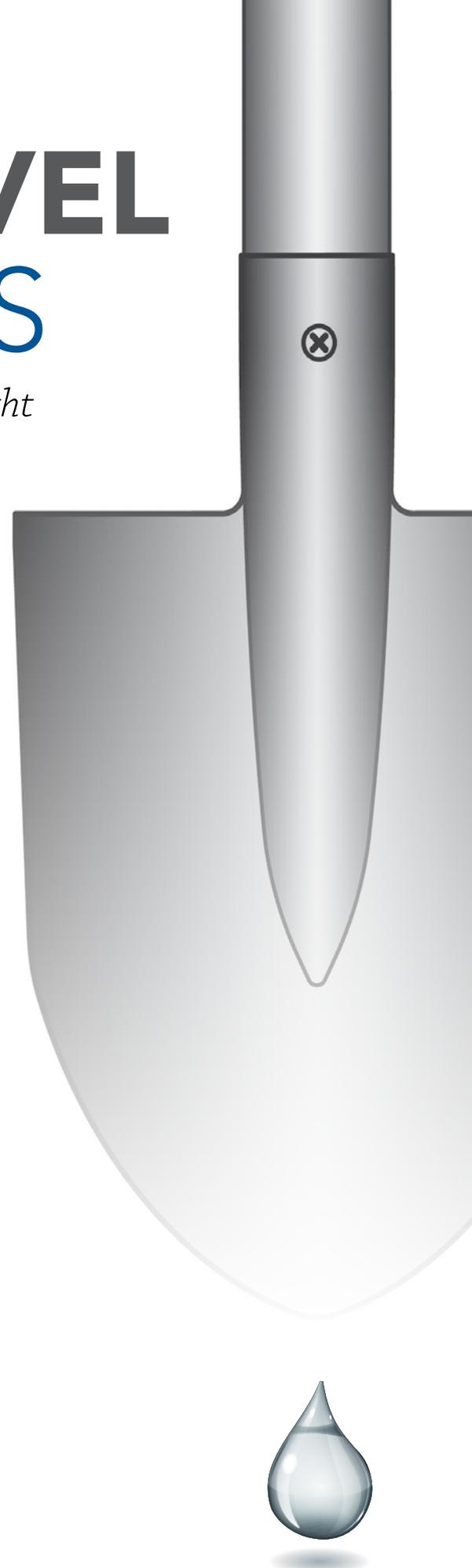
We all have those moments in our career where you think that you've seen it all — until you are reminded quite directly that's never the case. When I blasted through the doors of the courtyard, I saw something I hadn't seen before: a student with his back against the wall, swinging a shovel, yelling obscenities at anyone and everyone, and extremely angry at the world.

I was first on the scene and took a quick assessment of the situation. I immediately dug deep into my principal prep classes that trained me for this exact situation and

“When I blasted through the doors of the courtyard, I saw something I hadn't seen before: a student with his back against the wall, swinging a shovel, yelling obscenities at anyone and everyone, and extremely angry at the world.”

remembered I didn't have a class on how to deescalate a suicidal, angry, violent and emotionally-wounded student. So, my next step was to turn to whatever natural instincts I had for dealing with a situation like this. I looked around to assess the situation and found about five classrooms full of students pressed into the windows like an aquarium exhibit. I also remember hearing the sirens of our local police racing to the scene.

"Billy, put the shovel down," were the first words that came out of my mouth. This is a crucial first piece to the story that all principal prep classes should take note of: I knew the student's name (lesson #1 — in



“ Please don’t shoot him. I know him. Give me a chance to talk him down.”

this case I’ve changed the name to protect his identity). His gaze back at me was filled with rage and hate. However, because I’ve had a long nurturing relationship (lesson #2) with Billy, I knew his hate and rage was not directed at me, but rather at the world he was born into.

“Billy, please put the shovel down. Let’s just go for a walk and talk this out. I’m here to help,” was my next attempt to break through the shield of anger he’d put up around himself.

Have you ever had those moments in life that seem like a dream? This was one of those. I remember the bell ringing, signaling an imminent “passing time” which meant that about 1,100 kids were about to change classes while I was in the middle of this crisis. (Yes, I should have called for lockdown.) I just remember trying to block out the noise around me and focus on his eyes and our longstanding relationship.

What happened next changed the equation drastically. A police officer appeared next to me with his hand on his gun. I’m not sure if it was the shadow to my right or Billy’s words that alerted me to this new piece to the puzzle. “Go ahead and shoot me motherf’#@#\$er!” Billy yelled.

Oh boy, that’s not what we need right now.

I specifically remember slowly turning to the officer who I knew really well (lesson #3) and saying, “Please don’t shoot him. I know him. Give me a chance to talk him down.”

“Shoot me, mother f’#@#\$er!” he yelled again with even more taunting, anger, and hate. And, again, I found myself turning to the officer and saying, “Please don’t shoot him. We can talk this out,” as more officers started appearing, as well as the rest of my admin team. Thankfully these additional adults knew to block and redirect student traffic away from this standoff, but more adults didn’t necessarily help de-escalate our emotionally fragile student.

“Billy, c’mon man, put the shovel down. Let’s go to my office and just talk this out.” Most behavior experts would recommend not going back to my office, but in this case, Billy was used to that space as a safe and calming harbor. I just needed everyone to relax and for him to focus on the safety of our relationship (lesson #4). His eyes darted back and forth between me and all the uniforms as he continued to bait one of them to shoot him. To say things were a little tense was an understatement.

We continued this verbal dance for what seemed like an eternity as I slowly chipped away at his anger and got him to see me as a lifeline, not a threat. Eventually, instead of asking to be shot, he began begging for help. Billy was hurting and today was not a good day. And, per his normal reaction to overwhelming circumstances, anger was his first emotion. His second emotion was always hopelessness. The shovel turned into tears and I knew I had him. I could safely go in for what he needed most — a hug.

Scenarios like this are played out in schools all across our country on a daily basis. Many kids are hurting and hopeless, and building leaders are

first responders to massive amounts of emotional trauma. The answer isn’t a shiny new curriculum, more testing, and higher standards. The answer is an education system (with more adults) built upon time, space, and grace for relationships.

As much as some people might think Billy’s scenario was a day gone wrong, I see it as many things gone right. Just think how badly this could have ended up if relationships didn’t exist between the hurting student, building leaders, local law enforcement, and the rest of the staff in the school? Relationships matter. I’m also thankful I worked in a school where everyone agreed (including law enforcement) that the only “discipline” this hurting student needed was unconditional love, more adult support, and seeds of hope.

“ The answer is an education system (with more adults) built upon time, space, and grace for relationships.”

I find myself reflecting back on this day quite often and wondering if I could have done something different. And, each time I come back to the same answer: I wish I could have connected with Billy earlier in the day when hopelessness started taking him over. That’s my only regret.

Thank you to all of you who create hope and build relationships every day in your schools. ■



*Dr. Scott Seaman joined AWSP in the fall of 2013 after serving as the principal at Tumwater High School. In July 2018, he assumed duties as Executive Director.*