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## Students find support, outlet for grief online

- Students express sorrow and outrage in online forums
- Tributes to classmates grace sites such as Facebook.com
- Online group had as many as 28,000 members at one point

By Taylor Gandossy  
CNN

(CNN) -- For one Virginia Tech sophomore, the terrible news didn't come through a conversation with a friend or from the authorities, or even over the phone.

He learned of his friend Ross Alameddine's death through an AOL instant message with another friend.

"He was a really good friend of mine," the student, who didn't wish to be named, said through instant message, adding that they had grown apart before the shootings.

As their campus churned with chaos, many Virginia Tech students, grief-stricken and bewildered, turned to the Internet to share information and stories, ask questions and comfort each other.

On Facebook.com, a members-only social Web site popular among college students, dozens of groups were created, starting moments after the shootings. Students updated information within existing groups, and created additional groups long into the night, and into Tuesday.

As the number of confirmed deaths climbed from more than 10, to 20-plus and finally 33, students from Virginia Tech and other colleges and universities expressed sorrow and outrage.

There are now more than 200 groups related to the tragedy on Facebook.com alone. Some have only a handful of members; others have thousands. One group, "April 16, 2007," had more than 28,000 members as of Tuesday afternoon.

"This is unbelievable ... we must unite as a University in order for this University to heal at all," freshman Brandon Carroll wrote at 2:16 p.m. Monday on a discussion board.

Another freshman, Josephine Marrino wrote, "My prayers go out to all the victims and their families. It doesn't get much worse than this. These are the times we need to pull together and support one another."

Discussion boards on these Facebook groups compiled scattered media reports of the dead, the injured and the missing.

"If any of you knew any victims, you can use the wall for any support efforts or concern," wrote Virginia Tech freshman Tim Hall, the creator of "April 16, 2007 -- A Moment of Silence," on Monday.

As law enforcement labored to identify the dead and notify next of kin, students used services such as Facebook and Myspace along with e-mail and instant messenger to let loved ones know they were OK.

"Right when it happened, the [cell] phones didn't work," said Virginia Tech freshman Drew Clare on Tuesday. Too many people were

trying to use the phones, he suggested.

Clare had received a text message from his younger brother, Tyler, 17, who lives at home in Williamsburg, Virginia. He said Tyler's text message said, "Yo, I heard what happened, give me a call when you get this."

"I got three or four of those," he said. Unable to reply to his brother, Clare said he finally signed on instant message to let Tyler know he was OK.

Virginia Tech senior Chris Noack said he received a message from his little sister, a fellow Virginia Tech student, during the shooting Monday.

"What's going on?" Noack's younger sister said in an instant message. Noack said his sister lived on the fifth floor of West Ambler Johnston Hall, the dormitory where two students were killed. Before Noack could respond, his sister sent him another instant message. "I am 'hunkered down,'" she wrote.

Noack said his sister was unharmed.

Within an hour of the shooting, the school's student body leadership also set up e-mail chat rooms to communicate about what people could do without having to leave the safety of their apartments, said student body President Adeel Khan, a sophomore.


And students turned to online forums to communicate the sad news of who had been killed.

## **Gathering to mourn**

One Virginia Tech senior, Meredith Vallee, said she first learned of Reema Samaha's death through an invitation to a Facebook tribute group called "We Love You Reema."

She was a friend's little sister, said Vallee, an English major.

Vallee said there was a prayer message circulating the Web site for Samaha. "She was a beautiful, amazing dancer and a little shy. She had the biggest smile you could ever see and when she used it, it made people feel wonderful," Vallee said in an e-mail Wednesday.

Several other tribute groups for Samaha, similar to those for Alameddine, Ryan "Stack" Clark and Erin Peterson, now exist on Facebook. ([Watch online memorials that have been appearing](#) )

"In Memory of Reema Samaha" shows a picture of Samaha -- a thin, smiling girl with wavy, dark hair. "Why did you have to be in that classroom Reema? I loved you like my own sister. My life will never be the same without you in it," wrote the group's creator, Vincent Posbic of the University of Maryland.

One group, named simply "4/16/07," is dedicated to all victims.

"I started this group ... to make a very nice memorial dedicated to the lives of those lost," founder Marcos Correa, a recent Virginia Tech graduate, said Tuesday in an e-mail. Correa has gathered photos of about 10 of the victims. "We talk about the lives of the victims and gather to mourn & heal together."

Additionally, members of Correa's group have posted hundreds of self-made graphics from students all across the country.

Many of the graphics were school logos coupled with the Virginia Tech logo over a black ribbon. Most stated, "Today we are all Hokies."

Vallee said many Virginia Tech students had changed their Facebook pictures and instant messenger icons to that same black ribbon image.

"Facebook has kept a lot of people on their toes about what's going on," Clare said, adding that the site had become more of a forum for people to "talk to each other ... grieve together" than to exchange news.

Junior Jeff Cooper agreed. "I think the support groups are better at this point," he said in a phone interview Tuesday. "It's better to see all that."

CNN.com's Ashley Fantz and Kristi Keck contributed to this report.