

# Caught in the WAVE

JANE SPENCER

Seventeen-year-old Cliff Riggins is a self-described theater freak who wears black nail polish, listens to Godsmack and has experimented with Wicca, a neopagan religion involving witchcraft. At West Mecklenburg High School, located just off Billy Graham Parkway on the outskirts of Charlotte, North Carolina, these are not activities that get him chosen to head up the pep rallies. That duty is usually reserved for a crowd known around school as the "preps" who wear a lot of Abercrombie & Fitch and all seem to work at the county pool in the summer. Although Riggins has found a groove for himself at West Meck by spending lots of time in the theater department, he's frank about the fact that he's never really fit in. "I guess I've always liked to color outside the lines," he says.

While Riggins is used to getting weird looks in the halls, he never expected that his unusual tastes would make him a target of criminal suspicion. After the Columbine shootings, when the perpetrators identified themselves as members of an outsider group called the Trench Coat Mafia, he was pulled aside and confronted by teachers about his tendency to dress in black and occasionally wear a long coat. "FBI agents wear trench coats!" says Riggins, who has never been in a fistfight. "Maybe I don't look like everyone else, but it's not like I'm gonna go shoot up the school."



A new school-safety initiative launched at West Meck this fall means there is no end of aggravation in sight for students like Riggins. The WAVE, which stands for Working Against Violence Everywhere, is a corporate-sponsored program that features a toll-free number students can call anonymously to report classmates they deem dangerous. To help identify potential offenders, the WAVE, which is run by the global security giant Pinkerton's Inc., distributes brightly colored pamphlets outlining the "Early Warning Signs." Behaviors listed include "social withdrawal," being "easily angered by minor things" and experiencing "excessive feelings of rejection." The program enjoys the support of North Carolina's Democratic Governor, Jim Hunt, and is being introduced statewide in public middle and high schools.

The WAVE provides students with wallet-sized plastic cards stamped with the WAVE Line 800 number, entitling them to discounts and free gifts from the program's corporate sponsors. This fall participants were offered a buy-one, get-one-free Go-Cart or Bumper Boat ride at Celebration Station, an amusement park. Tamara Park, a spokesperson for Pinkerton Services Group, explains: "Students need to know that corporations are invested in their future. If kids get a discount when they use their WAVE card to buy a burger, it gives them incentive to hold on to the card and reminds them that corporations care."

While the corporate-sponsored reward system is unique to the WAVE, similar "early warning" behavior checklists are surfac-

ing in a slew of national school-safety programs aimed at identifying potential young offenders before they strike. This fall the FBI released a forty-five-page report titled "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective." Although the FBI study says it discourages "profiling" of students, it lists twenty-eight characteristics that are supposedly associated with past school shooters-among them watching TV without parental supervision, having a failed love relationship or demonstrating narcissism or inappropriate humor. Other warning-sign behaviors include depression, alienation and appearing detached from school. For Riggins, the report reads like a checklist for his high school experience. The FBI maintains that the study is intended only to help teachers evaluate a student who has made a violent threat, but others argue that creating such a list is inherently dangerous because of its potential for misuse as a profile.

In the past three years, having seen school shootings in Kentucky, Colorado and Oregon, school administrators have exhausted both students and budgets with efforts to combat a perceived epidemic. West Mecklenburg High has spent nearly \$200,000 installing forty-eight security cameras that monitor students in corridors and gathering spaces. (Giving the finger to the cameras is a popular hallway pastime.) The school also employs four security guards and a full-time police officer, who cruises the halls with a loaded Smith & Wesson on his hip. About once a month, visiting security officers interrupt classes at West Meck to conduct surprise searches.

The media's focus on a few horrific but extremely unusual incidents has fueled a widespread perception that violence is

exploding in American schools. In fact, schools are among the safest places to be in this country [see Annette Fuentes, "The Crackdown on Kids," June 15/22, 1998]. In late October, just weeks after presenting the FBI report on school shooters, Janet Reno delivered a Justice Department report documenting a 30 percent drop in school violence over the past eight years. Although 71 percent of Americans believe a school shooting is "likely" to occur in their community, juvenile homicide rates have fallen 56 percent since their peak in 1993. Even in 1999, the year of the Columbine shooting, school-associated violent deaths declined 40 percent from the previous school year.

"It's the best-kept secret in America," says Vincent Schiraldi, director of the Justice Policy Institute in Washington, DC, and co-author of a recent report titled **School House Hype**. "We're shredding the Constitution with random locker searches and anonymous hotlines. But these stringent school security measures are developed in an environment that is completely saturated with misinformation."

Of course, anyone who watched news clips of ninth graders wheeled out of Columbine High School on stretchers knows that youth violence, regardless of reduced-incident rates, is a continuing problem with devastating consequences. Violence rates are still higher than they were in the early 1980s. But are anonymous tip lines the right remedy? The FBI report clearly shows that students who commit violent acts experience intense feelings of social isolation. "We need to look beyond these quick-fix solutions like metal detectors, zero-tolerance policies and tip lines," says Bill Modzeleski, director of the Safe and Drug Free Schools

program for the US Education Department, who supports smaller class sizes and better counseling programs, for troubled kids and their families.

While the WAVE provides ample privacy protection and complete anonymity for those who call in tips to the toll-free number, it offers little defense for the fingered students. When calls come in on the WAVE 800 number, Pinkerton's "communication specialists" type up a report that gets faxed to three contact people at the caller's school and, in some cases, to local law enforcement as well. The investigation is left entirely in the hands of the school and local authorities.

"Anonymous tips are inherently unreliable," says Deborah Ross, executive director of the North Carolina chapter of the ACLU. "And they're even less reliable when you're talking about kids, who are more likely to play practical jokes." Ross notes that the WAVE Line could lead to constitutional tangles in the wake of last March's Supreme Court decision tossing out anonymous phone tips as legal grounds for police searches. Although many Fourth Amendment protections against search and seizure are suspended in public schools, the WAVE could run into legal problems if police follow up on an anonymous call.

The WAVE is Pinkerton Services Group's first venture into the educational realm, but the company has a colorful history of profiting from enterprises of questionable ethics. Pinkerton's fortunes were built by renting out private police forces as brutal strikebreakers in major nineteenth-century labor disputes, including the Homestead and Haymarket strikes. The company continues to provide armed security guards and "business intelligence" services to Fortune 500 clients, including Starbucks, Disney and Coke. In fact, the WAVE Line is an adaptation of Pinkerton's Alert Line service, a similar 800-number concept, which the company's corporate clients use to encourage employees to anonymously report co-workers who are slacking off, stealing or giving discounts to their friends.

Aside from a few public statements issued by the ACLU, resistance to WAVE is hard to come by in North Carolina. Many of the students, who've grown accustomed to regular searches and the daily presence of security cameras, see the WAVE and other profiling programs simply as part of the school-day routine.

On the web, however, the WAVE has generated a flood of spirited criticism. When Slashdot.org, a site that bills itself as "News for nerds," posted a story on the program last spring, Pinkerton was bombarded with 70,000 angry e-mails. Slashdot's message boards received more than 1,000 posts, many from students who feared they would be easy targets for reasons like their sexuality, pink hair or interest in transcendentalism. Although Pinkerton dismisses the protesters as representing the "fringe," it has amended its "Early Warning Signs" list based on the complaints. Still, fears abound about the likely abuse of any such list. As one ninth grader wrote on the Slashdot site: "Because I don't like the same (crappy) music as everyone else, or enjoy the pointless sports that they do, or drool over the same celebrities...I don't fit into their world view.... I've gone entire days without anyone speaking to me, or noticing my existence.. . . I can just visualize [them] making up some story, 'ratting me out'--and showing up the next day at school, grinning wildly.. . the security guards drag me into a van." ■