

# Recommendation letter: Holmes had emotional maturity

By P. Solomon Banda. 8/10/12 (AP)

DENVER – The Colorado theater shooting suspect left a good impression with people he came into contact with in his pursuit of a neuroscience career, with one person describing him as having a “great amount of intellectual and emotional maturity.”

That description comes in recommendation letter sent to the University of Illinois neuroscience program as part of James Holmes’ application to the school last year. The News-Gazette in Champaign, Ill., (<http://bit.ly/RwYEZs>) posted a story on its website based on documents obtained as part of an open records request.

Holmes is accused of killing 12 people and wounding 58. His attorneys claim he’s mentally ill.

“Researching learning and memory interests me because these are the very cognitive processes which enable us to acquire information and retain it. They are at the core of what distinguishes us as people,” Holmes wrote in his personal statement. “Due to the seemingly infinite vastness of indefinite knowledge we must be selective in our pursuits of knowledge. That is why I have chosen to study the primary source of all things, our own minds.”

Holmes declined to attend the highly selective program. He did not give a reason. The names of those writing recommendation letters on Holmes’ behalf were not released by the school.

In recommendation letters, Holmes is described as being in the top 1 percent of his honors classes with a cumulative grade point average of 3.949, making honors list.

“He takes an active role in his education, and brings a great amount of intellectual and emotional maturity into the classroom,” one recommendation letter reads. “James received excellent evaluations from the professor’s and graduate students with whom he worked and was mentored.”

Another letter describes him as “a very effective group leader” on assignments.

That description is a stark contrast to his demeanor in court, where he seems dazed, looking straight ahead and avoiding eye contact with those sitting in the courtroom.

As part of his application, Holmes submitted a picture of himself standing next to a llama.



# Experts: James Holmes' defense team will struggle to get insanity plea

By Jessica Fender, *The Denver Post* (08/11/2012)

The life-in-prison plea deal for mentally ill mass shooter Jared Lee Loughner in Arizona this week shows how difficult — and risky — insanity pleas in murder cases can be for prosecutors, legal observers say.

And that task is even more challenging in Colorado, where the burden falls to prosecutors to prove a defendant's sanity at the time of the crime.

As information about accused theater shooter James Eagan Holmes' mental health emerges, it appears prosecutors could face a choice: Cut a Loughner-like deal that guarantees prison time, or risk a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity that could leave Holmes institutionalized with a hope of someday walking free.

Both Holmes and Loughner exhibited bizarre behavior and allegedly shot into crowds that included children in high-profile rampages that had far-reaching effects on their communities. The horrific details of those crimes make it a more difficult choice to craft a plea deal, said Steve Jensen, chief deputy district attorney in Jefferson County.

"As a prosecutor, you would have to have some serious concerns about your ability to prevail ... to negotiate a deal like (Loughner's)," Jensen said. "But the thought that someone seriously ill and dangerous would one day be released back into society is something that has to weigh heavily."

Jensen's prosecution team risked a trial in the case of schizophrenic Deer Creek Middle School shooter Bruco Eastwood — one of the Denver metro area's most recent high-profile insanity cases — only for a jury to find him not guilty of attempted murder by reason of insanity.

Eastwood shot and injured two students Feb. 23, 2010. Once state mental-hospital doctors deem him safe to re-enter society and a judge concurs, Eastwood will be set free.

Holmes, 24, has been charged with two dozen counts of first-degree murder — two counts for each person who died when he allegedly opened fire June 20 at the Century Aurora 16 theater. He also faces 116 counts of attempted murder for the 58 injured victims who survived.

Jensen said he can foresee the difficulties his Arapahoe County colleagues are likely to face.

In Holmes' case, prosecutors won't necessarily have to meet a higher bar by showing he intended to kill people, because of the way they've charged his alleged crimes. But they will need to show he was able to distinguish right from wrong.

# Before Gunfire, Hints of ‘Bad News’

By ERICA GOODE, SERGE F. KOVALESKI, JACK HEALY and DAN FROSCHE

AURORA, Colo. — The text message, sent to another graduate student in early July, was cryptic and worrisome. Had she heard of “dysphoric mania,” [James Eagan Holmes](#) wanted to know? The psychiatric condition, a form of bipolar disorder, combines the frenetic energy of mania with the agitation, dark thoughts and in some cases paranoid delusions of major depression.

About two weeks later, minutes into a special midnight screening of “The Dark Knight Rises” on July 20, Mr. Holmes, encased in armor, his hair tinted orange, a gas mask obscuring his face, stepped through the emergency exit of a sold-out movie theater here and opened fire. By the time it was over, there were 12 dead and 58 wounded.

Interviews with more than a dozen people who knew or had contact with Mr. Holmes in the months before the attack paint a disturbing portrait of a young man struggling with a severe mental illness who more than once hinted to others that he was losing his footing.

Those who worked side by side with him saw an amiable if intensely shy student with a quick smile and a laconic air, whose quirky sense of humor surfaced in goofy jokes — “Take that to the bank,” he said while giving a presentation about an enzyme known as A.T.M. — and wry one-liners. There was no question that he was intelligent. “James is really smart,” one graduate student whispered to another after a first-semester class. Yet he floated apart, locked inside a private world they could neither share nor penetrate.

He confided little about his outside life to classmates, but told a stranger at a nightclub in Los Angeles last year that he enjoyed taking LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. He had trouble making eye contact, but could make surprising forays into extroversion, mugging for the camera in a high school video. So uncommunicative that at times he seemed almost mute, he piped up enthusiastically in a hospital cafeteria line when a nearby conversation turned to professional football.

Sometime in the spring, he stopped smiling and no longer made jokes during class presentations, his behavior shifting, though the meaning of the changes remained unclear. Packages began arriving at his apartment and at the school, containing thousands of rounds of ammunition bought online, the police say.

Prosecutors said in court filings released last week that Mr. Holmes told a fellow student in March that he wanted to kill people “when his life was over

# James Holmes: Portrait of an Alleged Murderer

By JOHN M. GROHOL, PSY.D.

Who is James Holmes and why should you care? He's the 24-year-old guy in Colorado who allegedly shot and killed 12 people in a movie theater more than a month ago, and left 58 wounded. News media have been desperately trying to piece together information about Mr. Holmes' life, because he had so little of a digital footprint. And because the neuroscience graduate program he attended at the University of Colorado, Denver has been tight-lipped about his short time there.

So the *New York Times* did some good old-fashioned reporting, digging into his friends, social life, and even talking to a few of his professors to cobble together a glimpse of the life and personality of James Holmes. What emerges is a list of traits that — while they could be associated with a mass-murderer — could just as easily be associated with any introspective, quiet person in America. And that's what makes such arm-chair psychologist profiling especially dangerous.

The overwhelming sense of the person who is James Holmes that you get from the Times profile is a very smart but very shy and somewhat awkward first-year graduate student. Interviews with people who knew or had contact with him before the attack tell a story of a man struggling with a mental illness and losing his footing, according to the Times story.

Those who worked side by side with him saw an amiable if intensely shy student with a quick smile and a laconic air, whose quirky sense of humor surfaced in goofy jokes — "Take that to the bank," he said while giving a presentation about an enzyme known as A.T.M. — and wry one-liners. There was no question that he was intelligent. "James is really smart," one graduate student whispered to another after a first-semester class. Yet he floated apart, locked inside a private world they could neither share nor penetrate.

And that's really the entire gist of what the Times uncovered. There was no smoking gun. There were few telltale signs that suggested he was about to escalate. Because as every mental health professional knows, it's one thing to talk about awful, unspeakable thoughts one has — and which mental health professionals and therapists hear everyday from different patients. It's quite another to actually carry them out.

Some students claimed he got "quieter" and even less talkative or joking in the spring semester. But since apparently nobody ever really got close to him, these are simply retrospective beliefs inescapably colored by what we now know about him. Isolating oneself is not a sign of someone about to commit murder — it's more often a sign of a person about to commit suicide.

In any case, professionals were alerted, but since he didn't meet any of the legal requirements for a forced commitment, little else could be done. After all, you can't imprison people in the U.S. based upon suspicion alone. The worst part is that some of his acquaintances believed they could have or should have done more to help him before he deteriorated. Some said they wished they had tried harder to break through his loneliness, a student recalled and told the Times. But that's just 20/20 hindsight speaking. Multiple students tried multiple times and in multiple ways to reach out to him, to make a human, social connection. He just wasn't interested.