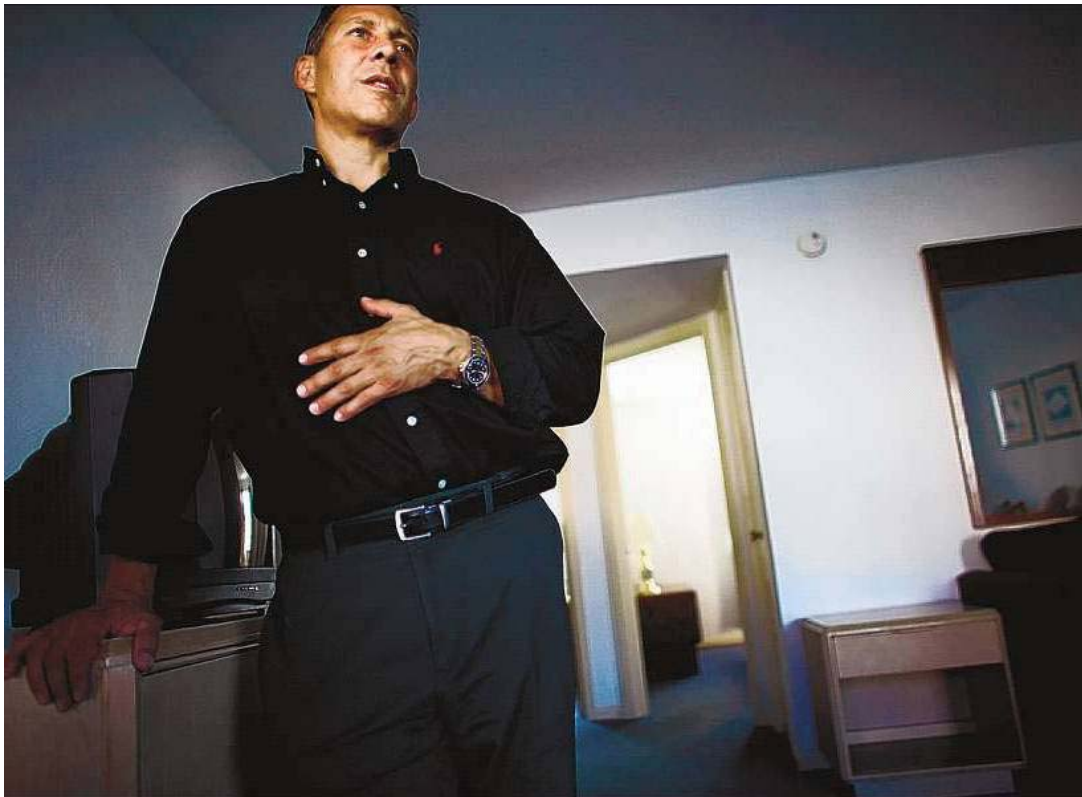


Dan Perrella has always been willing to invest himself to make something better – whether it was a run-down motel or an at-risk kid – but, finally, something had to give.



CHRISTYREE PHOTOS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Dan Perrella recounts the day – June 26, 2004 – he was shot in the stomach while showing a room at one of the motels he owns at Virginia Beach.

Developing potential

BY LAUREN ROTH
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

VIRGINIA BEACH — After a year of teaching math and reading to bored students at Green Run High School, Dan Perrella was just getting into the summer rhythm at La Coquille, a motel he has owned since 1999.

As he pulled into the parking lot in the early evening of June 26, 2004, he met three young men who wanted to see a room. He showed them 206, a suite upstairs and down a short, dark hall.

The men said they didn't want the suite, so Perrella opened his wallet and handed them a business card. They left, and Perrella checked on the desk clerk, who was working there for the first time.

Two of the young men returned, demanding to see the room again.

"I was in the middle of my presentation when I turned and the guy pulled out a 9 mm," Perrella said. It was the first gun Perrella had ever seen.

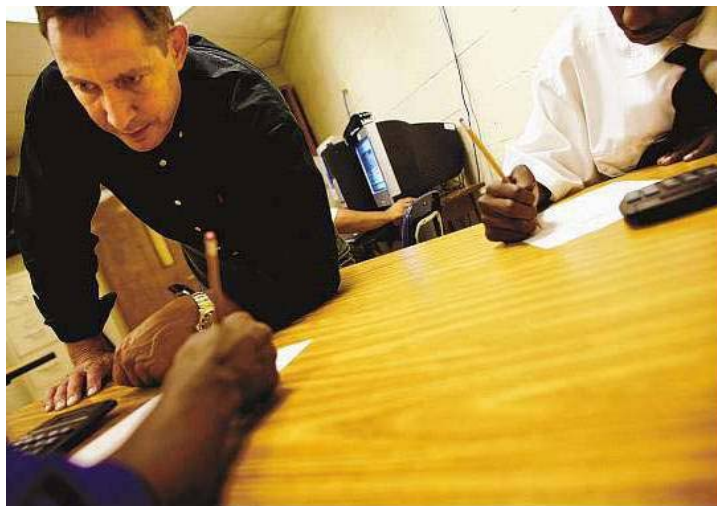
The man fired.

The bullet hit the teacher in the stomach. The gunman then knelt Perrella, pulled back his head and said, "Give me your ... money." He did.

Perrella, 49, remembered looking up to see a man about 19 years old – a kid, really – swinging the gun down, then pushing it, hot, against his head.

The teacher survived, perhaps only because the second man said he thought the man bleeding on the floor was dying.

Perrella lost his gallbladder and part of his liver. He recovered in a hospital room

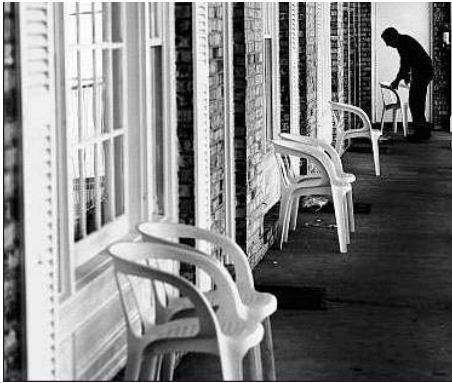


filled with flowers and supportive cards from students, hotel associates and friends. It took him six months to recover – and a year to feel like himself again. Then he went back to school.

Perrella thought about his young attackers, who were never caught. He hoped that by

Perrella started teaching special ed math at Central Academy in 2005. He was well-liked, but he was tired. After years of 80-hour work weeks split among school, hotels and rental properties, he retired from teaching last week to refocus on his family and his motels.

Please see **Teacher**, Page E2



CHRIS TYREE/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

La Coquille, the motel where he was shot, is still Dan Perrella's favorite. "This is not the Taj Mahal, but everything's neatly painted."

Teacher: Work took toll on family life

Continued from Page E1

teaching, he could find students heading down the same path and show them a better way.

So he applied to teach at Virginia Beach Central Academy, the public high school for students with discipline problems. He began teaching special ed math there in 2005.

At Central Academy, Perrella was well-liked. He could relate to his students and keep up with them. He told them about his life, including the day he was shot.

"Maybe he didn't want us to turn out like that," said Daron Lester, 16, one of Perrella's

students.

He also told them about his success in real estate — how he went from a motel desk clerk to owner of three motels and a portfolio of rental properties in 20 years.

Years earlier, as a young man in rural West Virginia, Perrella was a substitute teacher who invested in run-down properties. Seeking a more permanent place, he moved to Virginia Beach with \$50 and a car.

"I fell in love with the people and the ocean. I knew there was a lot of opportunity."

He got a room at the Captain's Quarters on 28th Street,

a block from the ocean, and a job as a sixth-grade teacher at Great Bridge Intermediate School in Chesapeake. Later, he sold cars and worked construction during the summer. On weekends, he worked at the hotel's front desk.

"He's not afraid of work," said Bruce Mills, who owned Captain's Quarters at the time and is now Perrella's lawyer and friend. "That's the secret of his success."

Perrella lived off his hotel earnings and got a feel for the business. After four years, in 1989, he invested in a block of apartments near the Oceanfront with his father. It was the first of many purchases in the area.

"He would buy run-down houses, go in and fix them up," Mills said. "He seized the moment when he could see the potential."

It has been a successful strategy.

For the past decade, Perrella hasn't needed the money he earned from school. He taught because he wanted to.

On a recent afternoon in a windowless, cinder-block room at Central Academy, Perrella handed out long division worksheets to a few students. Then he turned to look at online pictures of his wife, Kelly, 31, and their daughters, Victoria and Sofia, 5 and 3. Perrella also has an older daughter, Elizabeth, 16.

Most of the high schoolers played free Internet games along a bank of computers.

The classroom walls were nearly bare. That's because Perrella, after teaching in Virginia schools for 20 years, was wrapping up his academic career. He said goodbye last week.

Perrella was tired, and it was time to go.

Years of 80-hour work weeks split among school, hotels and rental properties has taken a toll on his family life.

It's time, he said, to refocus on his children, his wife and his motels.

"When you burn the candle at both ends, something had to give," said Mike Bolton, the principal at Central Academy. "We lost a good person with him."

The shooting didn't make Perrella think about leaving the motel business. Neither has his retirement from teaching.

The motels are part of his life and part of him.

"I love this business," he said. "I love people. I didn't want to sell."

He bought the 56-room Flagship Inn on Pacific Avenue a month before he was shot. This year, he bought the 50-room Castle Motel, about a mile south.

In the lobby of the Flagship, a small picture of Perrella's youngest daughters, taken by his wife, sits on a shelf.

From the parking lot, he looked up at the brightly colored facade. "I installed every door, lock and light."

A few weeks ago, he repainted the stairwells himself, in cheery peach and white.

But La Coquille, the motel where he was shot, is still his favorite. His first hotel, it's on 16th Street, less than two blocks from the ocean. The 14 simple suites go for \$150 a night in the summer and \$300 a week this time of year.

"This is not the Taj Mahal," Perrella said, "but everything's neatly painted."

On a recent afternoon, he grabbed a few weeds, picked up cigarette butts and rearranged the butter-colored outdoor chairs on the second floor.

Then he put his hand on the railing — the one that supported him after he was shot — and he headed downstairs.

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