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Correction: CORRECTION PUBLISHED 01/11/03: This article reported incorrectly that Minnesota laws prohibit firearms-safety training on school grounds. Such training is exempted from state restrictions on firearms possession and handling in schools.

## Aiming for the future

*In and unusual partnership, Plymouth Gun Club reaches out to students, with a focus on safety and mentoring.*

“Pull!”

On shouted command, orange disks streak across the firing line from left and right, high and low. Some are shattered by shotgun pellets. Others glide untouched to the shard-sprinkled ground.

It's late afternoon, and with the sun low behind him, 14-year-old Taylor Frankewicz is not enjoying one of his best days on the skeet range at Plymouth Gun Club. He switches from dark glasses to a pair with yellow lenses. At one point, he throws aside his frayed Green Bay Packers cap. After firing 25 shells, he moves to the adjacent trapshooting range. His performance improves.

Here, a machine flings the disks away toward the distant brown-gray woods. Each disk is 4 inches across but looks smaller with increasing distance. Even so, he hits several dead on. Both ranges are meant to provide target practice by simulating the erratic motion and speed of gamebirds.

Frankewicz's mother, Lorrie, watches from a nearby bench and talks of how Taylor's father died of a heart attack five years ago at age 42. She says she's glad that Taylor hooked up with mentor Jim Sable, a longtime gun club member, through the Orono School District 278's outreach program.

“This is a controlled environment where you can learn about guns safely,” she said. “Jim is like a grandpa [to Taylor] . . . and this is something I would not be able to teach him.” She also supports her son's decision to join the National Rifle Association.

Sable, who jokes that he considers himself more of an uncle than a grandfather to Frankewicz, said that as Taylor has become a better shot, he's also become more confident and outgoing. At the club's skeet shoot in September, he finished second by hitting 24 of 25 targets - up from 6 at the start of the season. He also shot 24 out of 25 in the trap competition.

## ‘A touchy thing’

Gun-related tragedies in the nation's schools have made shooting sports “a touchy thing for a lot of people,” said Maryanna Massey, the school district's mentoring and outreach coordinator. For that reason, she doesn't advertise the gun club's mentoring connection, although she eagerly accepted Sable's offer to help.

Sable was apprehensive, too, when he called Massey in 2001 to make that offer. He'd read a notice in a church bulletin seeking mentors for the school program, which matches adults with students who need help with basic skills. The idea is to build a relationship around a mutual interest and seek ways to build confidence and success - islands of stability in the sometimes unsettled lives of at-risk students.

The 45-year-old gun club has a different goal: to generate new members to keep the range busy and financially secure as new housing developments crowd its 20 acres in western Plymouth. The average age of its 135 members is 52, Sable said, and he figured a few students could help reach those objectives.

“I called and said I was interested in mentoring five kids,” Sable said. “Then I braced myself.” He feared that mentioning skeet and trapshooting might trigger a quick rejection.

What he didn't know was that Massey used to shoot a musket - “just shooting to see if you were a good shot.” He also didn't know that she had talked the day before with a 14-year-old girl who had asked to learn to trapshoot. “She said she loved to shoot but didn't like to kill,” Massey said.

When Sable called by utter coincidence, Massey said, “I was floored.”

She agreed to set up a meeting. As the weeks rolled by, the weekly conversations and shooting-range experience were helpful to the girl, Massey said. The student had a “scrambled home life,” Massey said, and didn't always follow through with appointments, but “Jim wouldn't give up.” After more than a year, the student switched schools and Sable lost touch with her. But Massey said, “Any good you can do for a child... who knows? She enjoyed herself. She opened up to Jim... He was a really positive influence.”

Jordan Buffett, a 14-year-old Orono ninth-grader who formerly was in the mentoring program, said he enjoys hunting and that his mother favored the training because it was well-supervised.

## Firearms safety

The gun club's mentoring program, in its second year, has 23 youngsters, including four from the school district. Most participants are friends or relatives of club members. Sable said some of the young members have improved enough to qualify for national skeet competitions.

Besides recruiting members, the program has another advantage, Sable said - maintaining some semblance of the hunting experience. “When my son was young, we used to hunt pheasants in Maple Grove,” he said. “You can't do that anymore” because fields have given way to housing and other development. But trap and skeet shooting on a range allows shooters to practice marksmanship skills and “doesn't require a season or a license,” he said. It also allows for instruction in safe handling of firearms.

The Plymouth club's property also provides a glimpse of natural habitat that used to spread across much of the suburban Twin Cities area. The club's land is home to deer and wild turkey, and Sable said that woods and valleys beyond the shooting range seem remote from the Harvest Hills development that has reached the club's border.

Sable has taught firearms safety courses for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for 35 years. He used to teach in the schools until a state law prohibited guns on campus. Although many take the safety classes because they're preparing to go hunting, “I remind them that hunting is only one of the shooting sports,” he said. He also invites class members to visit the Plymouth Gun Club.

The club reduces its normal shooting fees as an inducement. While club members are overwhelmingly men, Sable said he is eager to recruit more women. The National Sporting Goods Association has said that women make up about 15 percent of all participants in shooting sports.

Sable, who spent much of his career in the advertising business, is sensitive to how the media and even his relatives portray his favorite sport. “Pam, my middle child, was telling her son that guns are bad,” he said. “I said, ‘Pam, please restate how you're saying that.’ I have a wall gun case, and if guns are bad, then Grandpa is bad... The world has changed so much.”

In his own way, Sable is changing things, too.

“Our program is still in its infancy, and we're learning as we go along,” he said. “Next year, we are going to contact more schools, and I've already started recruiting mentors from our membership.”

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## Trap and skeet shooting

Both shooting sports have the same goal: Fire a shotgun to break a fast-moving clay target.

Practice is said to produce in the shooter a mental picture of how far to lead a moving target.

The principles of lead, swing and follow-through are applicable to all forms of shotgun shooting. The targets are the same for trap and skeet, but there are key differences:

Trap: Shooters fire from five adjacent positions in a crescent-shaped formation 16 or more yards behind a machine in a small enclosure on the ground. The machine throws the disk targets at various angles unknown to the shooter. Each person fires at an individual target.

After each has fired five shots from a particular position on the crescent, all move one station to the right until everyone has fired from all five positions, for a total of 25 shots.

Skeet: The skeet field is laid out on a semicircle with eight shooting stations. High targets are thrown from Station One (the “high house”) at one end of the semicircle; low targets from

Station Seven (the “low house”) at the other end. Although one can shoot by himself, the average skeet squad is composed of five people, each of whom shoots a round of 25 shots.

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