

When Will The Healing Start?

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Michael Shoels wearily leans back on the queen-size bed that dominates the small motel room. Several movie videos are stacked on the dresser. Sitting in a chair wedged in the corner, his wife, Vonda, stares blankly at a movie she has seen before.

Michael stares into space. His face would be hauntingly familiar to millions of Americans, who after a moment might place it: The father of 18-year-old Isaiah Shoels, the only black victim of the Columbine High School massacre.

It has been six months since Michael's courage and simple eloquence riveted the nation in an unforgettable appearance on the "Today" show, just two days after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold rampaged through the school killing 12 classmates and a teacher before committing suicide. While so many of the victims' families remained in seclusion, Michael Shoels went on the air and looked the world in the eye. "You know I love my children more than life itself," he told co-host Katie Couric, his voice stricken but steady.

Now that dignity in grief has been replaced by anger and alienation. Shoels is no longer the focus of network cameras and an outpouring of sympathy. He is an isolated man, out of work, living with his wife in a series of second-rate motel rooms, separated from his four surviving children, convinced that people are out to get him and that nobody will listen to him. Or almost nobody.

Abruptly, a man pokes his head out of the bathroom, which has been doubling as an inner office. This is Sam Riddle, the Shoelses' volunteer "family adviser," whose self-appointed task it is to listen to the Shoelses, and get the world to listen.

To that end, Riddle has good news: "They want you in Birmingham," he says, cupping his hand over the phone.

"They" are organizers of an anti-violence rally in Alabama. Though desperately in need of cash, the Shoelses will not make this appearance for money, they say, but to get the word out: Isaiah's murder was a hate crime, part and parcel of the racism that has plagued them ever since they moved to supposedly friendly Littleton, Colo., and continues to plague them now. It is racism, the Shoelses contend, coupled with their neighbors' angry reaction to their outspokenness, that has forced them from their home and made them targets.

Klebold and Harris shot their way into the Columbine High School library the morning of April 20, sending students scrambling for cover under tables, trembling in fear. Witnesses said they were taunting and laughing at their victims as they blasted their way through the room. Some said they were hunting minorities, athletes and Christians. Klebold and Harris reportedly paused when they came upon Isaiah, who was working on a term paper.

If the early reports are to be credited, Shoels had two strikes against him. He was one of only 16 blacks among the nearly 2,000 students enrolled at Columbine, and he was an athlete. Although he was just months away from graduation, Shoels was tiny: only 4 feet 11 and 130 pounds. The

Columbine senior had overcome serious heart problems to mold himself into a weightlifter and recreation league football player described by a friend as a "buff little kid."

Eyewitnesses said the killers called him a "nigger" before firing a shotgun blast that tore through his chest, shredding the base of his heart. For the Shoelses, these reports confirmed their worst fears and launched them on their lonely crusade.

But the idea that Isaiah was stalked and killed because of his race is now contradicted by investigators who have conducted thousands of interviews and combed through piles of evidence. As they prepare to issue their final report on the rampage sometime next month, authorities now say the idea that the killers targeted anyone in particular is a myth. Sure, athletes and Christians and two minority students--Isaiah and a Hispanic youth named Kyle Velasquez--were among those hit by the shooters, and yes, victims were cursed for a variety of imagined sins, but investigators now see them as targets of opportunity rather than the objects of a search-and-destroy mission.

"I don't believe that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went to Columbine to kill anybody specific," says Dave Thomas, the Jefferson County, Colo., district attorney. "They did make choices as they went. They spared some and killed others. . . . [But] their hatred seems to have been fairly widespread."

On the "Today" show, Michael Shoels said his son had been "hunted" because he was black. And nothing has made him change his mind. He doesn't believe the police when they say Isaiah was killed mostly because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And they don't believe them when they claim to have found no evidence to justify the family's fears of being targeted themselves.

They have taken their demand for a federal investigation of Isaiah's death to talk shows, to the press, to Attorney General Janet Reno, and to President Clinton. They have spoken at a half-dozen rallies, in places from New York to Dayton.

But they have not made much progress. Maybe their efforts have even backfired. Not only have they added to the strain the family has borne since Isaiah's death, there are those who argue that the Shoelses own words and actions--not endemic racism--have contributed to their transformation from sympathetic victims into scorned outcasts in the eyes of many people here.

Some of their neighbors have called them opportunists, hate-mongers, pawns of racial charlatans. Their personal lives have been picked apart in public. They have endured racial slurs from children, insults from strangers and anonymous death threats.

It has been a jarring reality for the Shoelses--a brief public embrace followed by this growing divide. Back in April, the strangely hopeful sight of a strapping 42-year-old black man in a Panama hat weeping alongside his white neighbors had engendered empathy in Littleton and beyond. Well-wishers wrote from far and wide. And like other Columbine victims, the Shoelses were comforted by the generosity of a nation. They received dozens of free plane tickets and car rentals to accommodate the friends and family who gathered for Isaiah's funeral.

District Attorney Thomas hand-delivered their first check from a charity that donated \$50,000 to each of the families that lost children at Columbine.

"I feel close to Michael Shoels," Thomas says. "I have a lot of affection for him."

Isolated in Grief

Despite that beginning, the Shoelses say it wasn't long before race became a wedge that set them apart. They say things started to change when Riddle emerged as their adviser and family spokesman. A longtime activist and political consultant dismissed by some here as a racial firebrand for his outspoken insistence that "racism pulled the trigger at Columbine," Riddle came into the Shoelses' lives just a day after the massacre. Riddle's then-boss, the late Colorado secretary of state Vikki Buckley, dispatched him to help the Shoelses manage the crush of reporters who descended on them in the wake of Isaiah's death.

"When I got to their house, there were four network cameras set up in their living room," Riddle says. "The first thing I did was throw them out."

Afterward, Riddle assisted with everything from funeral arrangements to helping the Shoelses find an attorney to file a wrongful-death lawsuit against the Columbine killers' parents. He steered them to lawyer Geoffrey Fieger, who is best known for his flamboyant defense of "suicide doctor" Jack Kevorkian and for winning a \$25 million judgment against the "Jenny Jones" show.

In filing the suit, the Shoelses announced they would be seeking \$250 million in damages, even though in Colorado damage awards are set by judges and juries. Still, the astronomical figure, and the desire of many in the community to move beyond the tragedy as quickly as possible, created an immediate backlash. Soon callers to the radio talk shows and newspaper letter writers openly questioned the Shoelses' motives, calling the lawsuit nothing more than an attempt to profit from their son's death.

"After people out here found out that we had talked to Fieger, we were really outcasts," Michael Shoels says. "The attitude out here was, 'Why don't they just shut up and let this thing die?' It seemed like everybody turned us off like a light bulb."

Before long, the family became embroiled in an ugly public feud with the Healing Fund, a charity established to oversee the \$4.4 million in donations that poured in for Columbine survivors. Beside the \$50,000 donations to each of the victims' families, the fund helped pay for medical bills, grief counselors and anti-violence programs.

After receiving their \$50,000, the Shoelses requested an additional donation. Michael Shoels's record production, promotion and talent search firm has been dormant since his son's death. "I'm emotional right now," Shoels says, explaining why he can't work. "I'm barely able to function."

The \$50,000 would be needed for living expenses, he said. More was needed for a down payment and mortgage for a new house. The home he had been renting when Isaiah was killed he no longer considered safe--Isaiah's death had convinced Shoels that the family had been targeted. That's why they had been moving from motel to motel, Shoels said, letting their four surviving children stay with grandparents.

Shoels also wanted money for private counseling. He says he doesn't trust the counselors made available through Jefferson County. He suspects the therapists are coaching patients to alter their accounts of what they saw at Columbine to undermine the idea that victims were carefully selected.

"I know my kids need counseling," Michael Shoels says. "But I don't want them to get it there."

The Shoelses' request for more money was rejected, prompting them to call for a national boycott of the United Way, which serves as a depository for the Columbine funds. "A charity ripoff," they called it.

For many in Littleton, all of this was a bit much. The lawsuit. The charges of racism. The plea for more money. The criticism of United Way. To them, the Shoelses' public posture needlessly tore at a community struggling to heal.

It also hasn't helped that the logic of the Shoelses' argument seemed to unravel in light of the horrible arithmetic of Columbine: Thirteen innocent people were killed in the school, two dozen more wounded, and many of them went down with vile insults ringing in their ears. Isaiah was the only black student shot. In the face of that, critics charged, how could the Shoelses blame racism for killing their son?

"It is clear to a lot of people that they are opportunists," says Peter Boyles, a Denver radio talk show host who has been one of the family's most outspoken critics.

Others vented to the United Way. "Don't give anything to Shoels!!!" read one letter to the organization, capturing the most widely held sentiment.

The family's problems did not stop there. It soon became public knowledge that as a teenager, Michael Shoels served three years in a Texas prison for violating a burglary probation before moving to the Denver area in 1977. His ex-wife called radio talk shows to say that for years Shoels was delinquent with child support for their daughter, now 20.

Feelings in the community had deteriorated enough so that many people justified all this sniping at a family that had, after all, lost an innocent son in a national tragedy--even some people normally inclined to charity: "In all honesty, by talking publicly about their circumstances, they did invite scrutiny," says Kelley Cahill, a vice president for the Mile High United Way.

"It is as though you have to go through a background check to be the family member of a murder victim," Riddle says.

The Phone Call

Michael and Vonda were home when their daughter Michelle called, hysterical. "After the phone rang, all I could hear was Vonda screaming something about a shooting at the school," Michael says.

Michael grabbed his shoes and ran out to the van with his wife. He jumped up so quick, his pants tore on his desk.

When they arrived at Columbine, heavily armed police had already cordoned off the grounds and they joined the anxious crowd of parents, students and a national television audience who watched the siege unfold. "We could hear guns going off and small explosions," Michael says.

As horrified children ran from the school, the couple searched in vain for their boys. Before long, the terrible explosions stopped. Authorities directed parents to meet their children at a nearby elementary school. There, the Shoelses' agonizing wait continued as busloads of Columbine students filtered through. Eventually, Anthony came in. That left Isaiah unaccounted for.

The last busload of children arrived at the school. Isaiah wasn't on it. Michael led Vonda outside, knelt beside a tree. He felt Vonda's hand on his shoulder. "We just prayed and asked God, 'Where is our son?'" Michael says.

As he was getting up, three students, friends of Isaiah's, approached Michael and Vonda. "I am not supposed to tell you this," one of them said, "but Isaiah is dead."

"All I could do was fall back on my knees," Michael says.

Official word from county officials did not come until the next day. It wasn't until several days later that Michael actually saw Isaiah's body, in the mortuary of a funeral home.

"He was under a blanket," Michael says. "I moved the blanket back to look at his wound. Then, I picked him up, hugged him and kissed him. That's all that I remember."

The Shoelses once delighted in hosting family cookouts and going to the movies together. They frequently turned out for Isaiah's football games. And Michael enjoyed lifting weights with his son. But Isaiah's murder and the community's rejection has ended all semblance of normal family life, leaving them reeling and, by their own admission, a little paranoid.

Michael and Vonda say their children, who are not happy to be living apart from them, are alternately withdrawn or lashing out in anger. Friends say Vonda, 33, who was so grief-stricken after her son's death that she had to be heavily sedated for weeks, is only now beginning to function. Neither she nor Michael wanted any part of the joint meetings other victims' families were holding in an effort to work through their grief. The Shoelses say their view of the Columbine massacre would only be discounted in that group.

"The 'truth' you hear about Columbine now is the saturated truth," Michael Shoels says. "I'm not taking part in the fabricated truth that's going on. We all might need counseling, but we won't be going to get it through them."

The Shoelses are convinced that they alone have been singled out for scorn, even though other victim families have spoken out, acted up and otherwise continued to be unraveled by the horror of Columbine.

Just over a week ago, Carla Hochhalter, the mother of a Columbine student left paralyzed after the shooting, walked into an Englewood, Colo., pawnshop, asked to look at a handgun, apparently loaded the weapon with ammunition she had brought with her and shot herself to death.

Several weeks earlier, a group of parents and other relatives of Columbine victims cut down two of the 15 trees planted by a church to honor the 15 who died at Columbine, protesting the fact that the number included the two killers.

Also, in recent weeks at least 18 more victims' families have stated their intention to file lawsuits as a result of the Columbine rampage. Even the parents of Klebold, one of the killers, have given notice that they plan to sue the Jefferson County sheriff's office for failing to inform them about the violent tendencies of his friend Harris.

"Early on, the Shoels family was symbolic of this tragedy. Now they are criticized for speaking out in the context of the tragedy," says Lt. Gov. Joe Rogers, Colorado's highest-ranking black elected official, who believes people are losing sight of the family's sorrow. "I can't help but believe they are in deep grief. There is certainly no greater pain than to lose a child."

Ironically, the posture taken by the Shoelses--believing the killings were due to calculated evil, rather than random madness--is not uncommon after mass tragedies. Counselors attribute it to what they call a "just world" theory, the belief that if people are good and make good decisions, good things will happen to them. So when extraordinary evil strikes, people often look for extraordinary culprits.

"Almost every victim I worked with has needed to find an answer," says Robin Fudge Finegan, who helped train grief counselors who worked with the Columbine victims. "The questions differ depending on who the victims are. The Shoelses ask: Was this a hate crime? I think people ask questions and they need answers."

Motives or Madness?

In the eyes of Isaiah's parents, at least, the killers' motives are clear, and part of a larger pattern that has become apparent in retrospect: persistent racism. They say Isaiah and two younger siblings who attended Columbine, Michelle and Anthony, were frequently confronted with racial insults that he says were typically pooh-poohed by Columbine officials.

Several months before the shooting, a white student had picked a fight with Isaiah, a generally buoyant and well-liked figure at the school. Both students were suspended. Soon after that, Michelle Shoels complained to officials at the school that white students hurled racial slurs at her there. Anthony, meanwhile, said that on several occasions white students had slammed him against the hallway lockers.

The Shoelses acknowledge that they sometimes shrugged off the complaints. And the ones that they did relay to officials at schools were shrugged off there. They had moved to the community more than a year earlier, in part because of the area's highly regarded schools. When their children came talking about trouble, they told them to tough it out. "I taught my kids not to use that racial thing as a crutch," Michael Shoels says.

On two occasions the Shoelses filed reports with the police about vandalism at their home. Once, someone threw rocks at the house in the middle of the night, breaking a ground-floor window. Three months later, someone kicked in their garage door. The family reported seeing five white youths running from the scene. Both times, the Shoelses say, police assured them that they were the victims of harmless pranksters, not racists. At the time, there was little reason to believe otherwise.

But in the confusing light of their son's murder, the Shoelses wish they had taken those things more seriously. They now see a connection between the harassment their children faced in school and Isaiah's death. And they wonder whether there is a link between vandalism at their home and references to "night missions" investigators found in a journal kept by one of the killers.

Other incidents in the wake of Isaiah's death have only heightened their fears. When school reopened in August, school officials found three swastikas in bathrooms. And just over a week ago, a 17-year-old Columbine student was arrested after vowing to "finish the job" started by Harris and Klebold.

"When this family looks at its experiences, what may appear to be disparate events to someone else seems like a continuous link that indicates that there are all sorts of biases out there," says John Dovidio, a professor of psychology at Colgate University. "If you feel distinctive because of your race in a particular environment, you have a heightened consciousness about race."

Tammy Theus, a computer consultant and friend of the Shoelses, understands their anguish. As one of the few African American residents in the community surrounding Columbine, she is sensitive to stares in restaurants, or what she sees as unwarranted attention from salesclerks.

"Race is always an issue out here; you can feel it," she says. "For Michael and Vonda, they kept coming to the school with things happening to one or the other of their children. They felt there was a problem. Now their son is dead."

Rally for the Cause

On a day five months after the shootings, Michael and Vonda slump heavily in their chairs on the stage of a Masonic temple in Brooklyn. They stare out over the crowd as Al Sharpton rallies his supporters to their cause.

"The only reason Isaiah was killed was the color of his skin," Sharpton intones, leaving the crowd of 175 on its feet applauding in righteous agreement.

The Shoelses count their appearance here as a coup. Previously they were guests on Sharpton's radio show, and the fiery activist says he was immediately captivated by their story. Whatever investigators found, he says, the Shoelses' account of racial torment in overwhelmingly white Littleton fits a larger truth.

"If you had Columbine in reverse, this family would be the poster child of American compassion, rather than disdain," which is Sharpton's way of saying that if the killers and other victims at Columbine were black and the Shoelses white, they would be treated differently. "We even discriminate in America on who we feel sympathetic with."

It is a point of view clearly shared by many at the Brooklyn rally. As Sharpton readies a large wicker basket to collect money for the Shoelses, he pumps the crowd up with his take on the events at Columbine. "The Trenchcoat mob in Colorado is part of a larger problem," he says. "We ought to fight it like we know how to fight."

With that, Michael Shoels pushes himself up from his chair and takes the floor. At 5 feet 6 and 260 pounds he is a powerful figure, and his shoulders and thighs bulge as he paces the stage in blue dress slacks, tight blue vest, white open-collar shirt, black cowboy boots and straw hat.

He speaks loudly into the microphone, but his voice is plaintive, not angry, telling a story that reveals the confusing tangle of raw grief and racial suspicion that has ensnared his family since Isaiah's death.

"They have put me and my family and wife on trial as if we went in that school and pulled the trigger ourselves. They call us rabble-rousers. They say we never wanted to be part of the community and we are taking it down," he says as the audience nods in agreement. "My son lost his life, and we're the ones tearing the community down?"

Soon, Vonda is up. She is as soft-spoken as her husband is boisterous. She bats back tears as she recounts a conversation with Isaiah that has haunted her since his murder.

The Shoelses were riding in the family minivan when Isaiah piped up with a strange question. "What would you do if somebody got a gun and killed all of your kids?" he asked. "Would you get the people who killed us?"

Michael pulled the van over and pressed Isaiah for details. "Why did you say that? Has anyone threatened you?"

Isaiah quickly changed the subject. He told his parents he was just posing a hypothetical question. Still, Michael and Vonda told Isaiah that they would never respond with violence, but they would speak out against senseless hatred if such a thing happened.

Three days later, Isaiah was dead.

The story moves the crowd, which is soon filing forward with contributions. Sharpton drops a \$1,000 check into the basket. Others soon step up donating tens and twenties.

Within minutes, maybe \$4,000 has been collected for the Shoelses, who assure the crowd the money will go to a worthy cause: supporting their efforts to keep the memory of their son's death alive. The money will pay the motel bills and help support their children while Michael and Vonda try to put their lives in order--and continue to speak their piece.

"We signed a verbal contract with our son that we would fight hate the rest of our lives," Michael Shoels says. "That's all we're doing."