

COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL: ANATOMY OF A MASSACRE

BY **MATT BAI** ON 5/2/99 AT 8:00 PM



Columbine high school students run from the scene of one of the worst school shootings in U.S. history. REUTERS

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It was a phone call that will stay with Denver Police Officer John Lietz for the rest of his life. Shortly after 11 last Tuesday morning, he picked up the line to hear the voice of Matthew Depew, the son of a fellow cop: Depew and 17 other Columbine High School students were trapped in a storage room off the school cafeteria, hiding from kids with guns. Lietz himself had a daughter in the school, and he could hear bursts of gunfire in the background. Lietz told the kids to barricade the door with chairs and sacks of food, and to be ready to attack the gunmen if they got in. Several times Lietz heard the shooters trying to break into the room; they were so close that he could hear them reloading cartridges. At

one point, as they pounded on the door, Depew calmly told Lietz that he was sure he was going to die. "Please tell my father I love him," he said.

For a few horrific hours in Littleton, Colo., last week, the school outcasts finally had all the power--and they wielded it without mercy or reason. As scores of students like Depew barricaded themselves in classrooms and closets, praying for deliverance, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold casually decided which of their classmates should live and which should die, and laughed triumphantly as they meted out fate. "They were, like, orgasmic," says 19-year-old Nicholas Schumann, who heard the worst of it from a room under the library. Harris and Klebold made at least two female hostages answer a question: did they believe in God? When they said yes, the gunmen shot them at point-blank range. By the time the terror ended with the killers' own suicides, 12 students and a teacher were dead, and 23 students were wounded, several of them critically. Klebold and Harris hoped to get the last laugh: it took days for police to find and defuse about 30 propane-tank and pipe bombs they had planted in the school for maximum carnage.

Many mysteries surround the most lethal school shooting in history. Just how many members of the Trenchcoat Mafia might have been involved? Several eyewitnesses told police and NEWSWEEK that they had seen a third gunman; at least two possible suspects have approached Denver lawyers about their role in the melee. Police sources expect further arrests this week. But the most vexing puzzle, perhaps, is the motive. How did brainy kids from seemingly stable, affluent homes become killing machines without a hint of remorse? The murders fascinated and appalled the country, not least because the mayhem unfolded in an archetypal place (a suburban high school) and touched on cultural forces (the Internet, violent movies and videogames) familiar to all Americans. Still, there is one overarching question: why? The tragedy's roots are most likely twisted, ranging from the availability of guns, to biology and possibly troubled family lives, to the taunts of more popular classmates--and the beginnings of an explanation can be found only in the portraits of the killers.

Harris and Klebold had been steadily losing their way in the world for some time. Neither set of parents was talking last week, except to issue terse statements of

regret. Harris's father is a retired Air Force officer who moved the family frequently. Before coming to Littleton, Harris lived in upstate New York, where he played Little League like any other kid--although it was his older brother, Kevin, who was the star athlete. His parents were supportive, recalls the team's coach, Terry Condo: "I wouldn't mind having 12 sets of parents just like them." Like Harris, Klebold was an exceptional student who played in a fantasy baseball league and quoted Shakespeare easily. His father, a geologist, owns a sprawling contemporary home with a guest house and a half-dozen vintage BMWs. "Dylan was a follower," says Nick Baumgard, a childhood friend whose prom date, Rachel Scott, was among those killed outside the cafeteria. "He always needed someone to follow. Then he got hooked up with Eric."

The two became "obsessed" with the violent videogame Doom--an interactive game in which the players try to rack up the most kills--and played it every afternoon. They worked together at a pizza place, and Harris worked at a fireworks stand. A few years back they fell in with the Trenchcoat Mafia, given its name by the jocks who made fun of the group. Though much has been made of the group's ties to the "Goth" culture of black clothing, nihilism and funereal rock music, those who knew Harris and Klebold say it was primarily a way of fitting in with other kids. "They'd walk with their heads down, because if they looked up they'd get thrown into lockers and get called a 'fag'," says junior Makala Scrobin.



REUTERS

Harris and Klebold got into real trouble in January 1998, when they were arrested for breaking into a commercial van and stealing electronics. The two boys paid weekly visits to a "diversion officer" and were subjected to a range of reform programs, from community service to a Mothers Against Drunk Driving panel to an "anger-management class." They were also prohibited from owning weapons or explosives. The program officers for both boys marked their prognosis as "good."

"Dylan is a bright young man who has a great deal of potential," Klebold's officer wrote. "He is intelligent enough to make any dream a reality but he needs to understand hard work is part of it." "Eric is a very bright young man who is likely to succeed in life," said Harris's case officer. "He is intelligent enough to achieve lofty goals as long as he stays on task and remains motivated." In an interview

with NEWSWEEK, the program's supervisor defended those conclusions as reasonable at the time, if not altogether accurate. "They were absolutely compliant, and they did a good job," said Bobbi Spicer, director of the probation program. "No one can predict lethality. If every murderer looked like Charles Manson, it would be easier. But if they look like Ted Bundy, you're in trouble."

Both Harris and Klebold became enamored of Nazi culture, and learned enough German to berate their classmates. Harris's Web site and e-mails apparently referred to Hitler's birthday--the day of the shooting--as the occasion for something big. "Kill 'em AALLL!!!" Harris allegedly wrote in his America Online profile. Their work in school took on a chilling tone as well; an English teacher brought one of the boys' work to the attention of a guidance counselor because his writings were so violent, according to students and teachers. The boys made a tape for a video-production class in which they pretended to shoot all the jocks--with a real rifle. In fact, Harris and Klebold had forgotten their pledge not to have weapons. Classmate Peter Maher says they waved a pistol at him out the window of Klebold's black BMW last July 4. Matt Good, a 16-year-old neighbor of Harris's, says that in recent weeks the boys were always in Harris's garage, and last weekend they were loudly smashing glass; cops now say that was for the shrapnel in their bombs.

Harris and Klebold didn't do much to disguise their intentions last week. Tuesday began for them as it always did, with a popular 6:15 a.m. bowling class. On this day, as on many others, Klebold wore a shirt that read serial killer. Classmates recall that when he and Harris would hit strikes or spares, they would shout "Sieg Heil!" in celebration. Today was no different. By 11 a.m., Harris and Klebold were wearing wraparound shades and their trademark black trench coats--the kind of oilskin dusters popular on Colorado ranches--as they came over the small hill toward Columbine's cafeteria. Denny Rowe, a 15-year-old sophomore, was among the first to see them coming. Sitting on a knoll not far from the cafeteria entrance, he watched as one of the two took off his coat to reveal what looked like grenades. The other lit a brick of firecrackers and threw it toward the school entrance. Rowe watched as one of the boys then brandished a semiautomatic

rifle and pointed it at 17-year-old aspiring playwright Rachel Scott. An instant later, the boy shot her in the head.

Rowe's first thought had been that the kids were filming a video, as the two members of the Trenchcoat Mafia often did. When he saw the blood, he figured it was paintball, part of a senior prank. The next target was Danny Rohrbough, 15. A quiet freshman who hoped to one day join his dad's electronics business, Rohrbough was standing just outside the entrance when a first shot hit him in the thigh. He stumbled and tried to run away, but the gunman wasn't finished. He shot Rohrbough in the back, killing him.

Then the killer swiveled toward Rowe and his friends. The next shots shattered the knee of one of the boys next to Rowe and hit another in the chest. Rowe ran for cover, bullets whizzing overhead. Like Matthew Depew, who was on the phone with Officer Lietz, he managed to escape unharmed.

There were some 500 kids in the cafeteria when the first victims fell, and they found shelter where they could amid the bullets and exploding pipe bombs. A sheriff on duty in the cafeteria exchanged fire with the teen gunmen before stopping to help injured students. Two freshman girls hid in the bathroom, climbing up on toilets so the gunmen wouldn't see their feet. "I'm guarding the stairs!" they heard one of the assailants yell outside the door. Another group huddled in a small supply closet upstairs, squatting for two hours so they couldn't be seen through the window. Harris and Klebold loudly cheered their own marksmanship and, at one point, apparently broke the gas spigots in a science lab and tossed a pipe bomb inside, rocking the building. The trapped kids took out pictures of their families and prayed. A science teacher with drying blood on his shirt quietly wept.

Tapes of 911 calls released last week show the panic and confusion in that first hour of the siege. "The school is in a panic, and I'm in the library," a teacher told the dispatcher. "I've got students down. Kids, under the table! My kids are screaming under the table... Oh, God! Oh, God! Kids, just stay down. Do we know where he's at? I'm in the library. He's upstairs. He's right outside of here."

More would surely have died had it not been for Dave Sanders, a popular business teacher and basketball coach. He was standing near the cafeteria doors when the first students went down. Sanders went running into the cafeteria shouting loudly: "He's got a gun! Get down!" The urgency in his voice broke through the lunchtime din, and hundreds of students fell to the floor. There was a hail of gunfire, and Sanders and other teachers shouted at the kids to keep moving.

Instead of seeking safety, the 47-year-old Sanders ran upstairs toward the library and science rooms to warn other students. It proved fatal: he found himself face to face with Harris and Klebold. They shot him in the chest. Sanders crawled to a nearby room, where students tried for three hours to save him, pressing their shirts to his bleeding chest. Deidra Kucera wrote out a sign that said: HELP ME I'M BLEEDING TO DEATH. She posted it in the window facing the parking lot. But a SWAT team on the scene was busy trying to save Patrick Ireland, caught by television cameras dangling out a shattered library window. "I don't think I'm going to make it," Sanders told the kids. The students prayed as he asked them to tell his girls that he loved them. By the time a SWAT team got into the room--looking so much like the gunmen in their black uniforms that a few students panicked--Sanders was taking his final labored breaths.



President Bill Clinton looks down while speaking in the White House briefing room about the mass slaying of students at a Colorado high school April 20. REUTERS

The rescue operation began within minutes of the first 911 call. John Aylward, a paramedic with the Littleton Fire Department, was one of the first on the scene. Cops were crouched behind cruisers with their guns drawn; they told Aylward that there were students down under the library window, near the school's southwest corner. Aylward and his team daringly pulled a rescue vehicle onto the grounds to evacuate the wounded. He jumped out to tend to a 17-year-old girl shot in the chest and back. She was a ghastly white, and her eyes were rolling back into her head. As he examined the gunshot wounds on her chest and back and loaded her into the truck, she breathed in heavily and used all her remaining strength to mouth two words: "Help me."

Cops feared the fatalities would mount until the killers were stopped. "We gotta get up there--there are kids getting shot," a SWAT leader told Vince DiManna when he arrived. A captain in the Denver SWAT force, DiManna also had an 18-

year-old son at Columbine. Grabbing his off-duty revolver and some body armor from his trunk, he led the first SWAT team over to the main entrance, where he could see a shooter glimpsing the team through an upstairs window, over a wide-open set of double doors.

DiManna suspected a trap. "They want us to come in through the front door," he thought. He sent five men in to the left of the main entrance instead, and led another team over to help the wounded near the cafeteria. Taking cover behind a fire truck outside, DiManna saw a girl on the ground and a boy who plaintively raised his hand. "God, we gotta get that kid," he said. Another SWAT member agreed. "We're not gonna let those kids bleed to death," said Lt. Patrick Phelan. Hunching behind shields and creeping forward, the officers first came to Rachel Scott. There was a bullet hole in her temple. "She's gone," Phelan said. They moved to the boy, Ricky Castaldo, whose eyelids were fluttering. Phelan grabbed his legs. "We're gonna get you out of here," he said. "Get ready, buddy, we're going." (Castaldo was in serious condition last week.) Soon there were 20 officers roaming the school's corridors in a desperate seek-and-save mission. The place looked like a battle zone: fire alarms were so loud that they couldn't hear the gunfire. Strobe lights were flashing, and the floors were submerged in water from the sprinkler system. Glass everywhere was shattered, and cafeteria tables were upturned and littered with food. The air reeked of explosives. The officers liberated kids from closets, cupboards and a walk-in freezer. Ten people were holed up in a restroom and refused to come out until an employee vouched for the identity of the black-clad SWAT team.

Every male student had to be frisked and treated as a possible suspect, in case one of the gunmen tried to slip out with the victims. The students had the "zombie look" of war survivors, DiManna says, and he was looking for the coherent ones, hoping for information on the killers. Soon their identities became clearer, as students who recognized them passed the word along. The second and third waves of SWAT teams were given yearbook photos of Harris and Klebold, the honors students turned terrorists. At one point a caller to District Attorney Dave Thomas's office said he was the lawyer for Klebold's parents. He wanted to know if the father could come down and help. The question was relayed to the SWAT

commander, who answered with a shake of his head: "No." It was too late for that. The SWAT teams were about to reach the school library.



Columbine High School students wait in a residential area adjacent to the school for their fellow students and friends to escape the building where gunmen opened fire on terrified students, killing up to 25 people before taking their own lives April 20, police said. The students' wait was rewarded as their friends soon appeared and boarded school buses to take them out of harm's way. REUTERS

Harris and Klebold were apparently looking for revenge on the jocks who bad-mouthed them; strange, then, that they took their hostages not in the locker room but in the library. Here they played out the twisted final chapter in their personal apocalypse, torturing their innocent victims with arbitrary and slow deaths. They said they wanted anyone wearing a white ball cap, the signature of Columbine athletes: "All jocks stand up!" one gunman yelled. Students hiding in rooms

below and next to the library heard sporadic gunfire interspersed with terrified screams and cruel laughter. Kacey Ruegsegger, 17, who had been studying in the library when the shooting started, was cowering under a desk. One of the gunmen leaned down and said to her, "Peek-a-boo." Then he shot her. (Ruegsegger lived but faces major shoulder surgery.)

Under another desk was Isaiah Shoels, 18, one of a handful of black students at Columbine. He was a popular athlete who liked doing yard work and planting flowers at his family's home in his spare time. He had also had a few run-ins with the trench-coat crowd and had even come to blows with some of them. Like the parent of another student who had tangled with Harris and Klebold, Shoels's father says he had complained to school authorities about the boys. He thought they were dangerous racists. "Hey, I think we got a n----- here," one of the killers said now, spotting Shoels. They shot him in the head, and when he crumpled to the floor, they added two more bullets in the face. "Hey, I always wondered what n----- brains looked like," one of the boys is said to have laughed.

SWAT teams and medics entering the library sometime after 2 p.m. found a grisly pile of bodies that they worried were booby-trapped with explosives. One medic was pulling at bodies when he heard a girl's voice murmur: "Ow, my shoulder." Lisa Kreutz, 18, had been shot at least six times; she was pale and had almost no blood pressure. (She, too, was in serious condition last week.) Among the dead were Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, each shot once in the head in an apparent double suicide. One of the best friends was lying on a handgun, his body still ringed like a commando with live ammunition.

For the parents of Littleton, the horror was just beginning. As the siege wound down, hundreds of students were bused to a nearby elementary school, where they checked in and were put onstage in the auditorium to be claimed, like refugees from a camp. All day long, worried parents searched for their kids, but by 8 p.m. only a handful remained. "We knew that those parents left--all those kids were dead," said a Denver police officer who oversaw the questioning of students. The parents finally knew when D.A. Thomas came onstage and haltingly asked if they could provide descriptions of their children's clothing, dental records or fingerprints. Two mothers went outside and vomited.

Police are still trying to unravel the intricate plot hatched by Harris and Klebold-- and perhaps others. They think the boys may have smuggled time bombs into the school during a post-prom party the week before the siege, but they would have needed help. Police detained three young men in a nearby field and one in the parking lot while Harris and Klebold were killing their classmates; the men were released. It's still not clear where the boys got their guns and ammo, but in Colorado it would have been legal for the 18-year-old Harris to buy firearms, even with a juvenile felony conviction. Police searching Harris's room last week found a sawed-off shotgun and pipe-bomb ingredients in plain view. They also recovered a diary detailing the boys' twisted plans for the massacre, including calculations as to the time of day that would yield the highest body count.

In the days that followed, there was plenty of blame going around. Denver Mayor Wellington Webb called on the National Rifle Association to cancel its upcoming meeting there. It was curtailed, and the state legislature dropped two bills that would have eased gun laws. Some parents, like Isaiah Shoels's father, Michael, blamed themselves. "Isaiah said these guys kept getting in his face," said Shoels. "I went up to the school to talk about it, but I should have done more. It's tearing up my heart." Others were furious at the parents of the two dead killers. "How out of touch are you with your kid that you don't know he's making 30 bombs?" asks Jay Beard, whose son knew Klebold. But the murderers wanted responsibility for the massacre all to themselves. "Do not blame others for our actions," police paraphrased Harris as saying in a suicide note. "This is the way we wanted to go out." Their 13 victims would never say the same.



A family walks by the ever-growing wall of flowers and memorials left next to the Columbine High School April 28. The hill in the background is also a memorial site. REUTERS

The Victims

The killers at Columbine High took 13 innocents with them to the grave last week. A shy science whiz, the captain of the girls' volleyball team, a beloved teacher--all gone, their dreams scattered among the shell casings.

Cassie Bernall, 17

A photographer and aspiring doctor, she always had her Bible at school.

Steven Curnow, 14

Gifted soccer player and 'Star Wars' fan. Hoped to pilot a Navy F-16.

Corey DePooter, 17

A fly-fisher who loved his mom's pork chops. Hoped to join Marines.

Kelly Fleming, 16

Wrote poems, stories, songs. She was learning to drive and to play guitar.

Matthew Kechter, 16

Straight-A football player worked for a year to buy beloved blue Chevy.

Daniel Mauser, 15

Science whiz loved Foosball. Planned to climb first peak with Dad.

Danny Rohrbough, 15

Worked in his father's electronics shop. Loved to buy gifts for his family.

Dave Sanders, 47

Teacher got students to safety. Last words: 'Tell my girls I love them.'

Rachel Scott, 17

Starred in school play. Little brother pretended to be dead and survived.

Isaiah Shoels, 18

Just 5'2", could benchpress twice his weight. Loved to plant flowers.

John Tomlin, 16

Devout Christian, he aided the poor in Mexico. Wanted to join the Army.

Lauren Townsend, 18

Volleyball captain, she was a strong candidate for valedictorian.

Kyle Velasquez

His family did not release information on their son.