

## Killers left long trail of clues

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LITTLETON, Colo. - Nobody saw it coming. Or did they?

During second period Tuesday morning at Columbine High School, the daily list of school announcements was telecast to every classroom from the video center.

At the end of the announcements came the "phrase of the day," often an irreverent bit of teen commentary meant to provoke a thought or a laugh. On Tuesday, recalls Columbine sophomore Patrick Simington, the phrase on the screen, accompanied by the music of a German techno-pop group, was: "I BET YOU WISH YOU WEREN'T HERE TODAY - 4-20, 4-20, 4-20."

Who wouldn't have agreed, had they known what horror was about to unfold a couple of hours later? Before long, the entire world would know that Columbine seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had killed 12 students and a teacher with guns and explosives before killing themselves.

Shock and numbness ruled in the wake Tuesday's tragedy. But as grief and anger take over, questions reverberate now about whether parents, teachers, school officials and fellow students could or should have noticed the dark path that Harris and Klebold followed. Experts interviewed by USA TODAY said that, given the history of school shootings, any of the threats the boys made should have been taken seriously.

"They obviously were very prepared" for Tuesday's assault and "gave clues," says Simington, 16, who is convinced the eerie classroom message was no coincidence.

It isn't known who posted what was, in hindsight, a chilling turn of phrase. But students say Harris and Klebold, as well as others in their Trench Coat Mafia clique of Columbine outcasts, had been involved before in Columbine video production.

The two even made a video for a video class at school last fall that depicted them shooting other students as they walked down the corridors, according to students who have seen it. In retrospect, the video looks like a rehearsal for the real thing.

"They had their friends pretend to be the jocks, and they pretended to be the gunmen shooting them," junior Chris Reilly told Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*. "It was disturbing to everyone who saw it."

The teacher of that video class has refused to comment. Jefferson County Public Schools says it is investigating the video but won't discuss it further.

Jefferson County Sheriff's Lt. John Kiekbusch says the video, obtained early in the investigation, strongly suggests that the two and their cohorts in "this Trench Coat gang walked through or enacted in such a fashion what they intended to carry out."

There were other unsettling signs.

One student, Brooks Brown, told Denver's KUSA-TV that Harris had threatened last year to kill him, even posting Brown's name on his own Internet home page, atop a list of people Harris said he wanted to kill. Brown's family claims it tried to warn police, but to no avail.

"The police were warned. They knew. They didn't do anything. Because of that, people are dead," Brown says.

The family of Isaiah Shoels, a black student shot dead in the school library, believes school officials ignored their complaint that their son, the only minority among the victims, had been threatened by the Trench Coat Mafia. A school district spokeswoman said the complaint would not have been ignored had it been made to the principal.

One of the guns the two youths used was a Tec-9, a now-banned assault weapon. An unsettling drawing that appeared on Harris' Web site included a Tec-9, along with a man firing two assault weapons, one in each hand, at another person, whose arm and shoulder are spouting blood.

Eric Veik, 16, a student who has seen the video that Harris and Klebold made, said he had overheard the two joking that it was "time to plan the senior prank for the Class of '99" and making comments that "Hitler's birthday was coming up."

Since the killings, little has been revealed about whether any of the adults in the teens' lives recognized how troubled Harris and Klebold were. The parents of both boys have been in seclusion, and school officials, swamped with the enormity of the tragedy, haven't commented.

Whether they ever will discuss all the warning signs could be driven by whether the survivors and the families of the dead take their pain to court. Wrongful-death lawsuits against parents and school districts have almost invariably followed other high-profile school shootings.

"There is a lot of ignoring that goes on in these kinds of situations," says James Garbarino, co-director of the Family Development Center at Cornell University. "Parents often don't want to acknowledge what might be such an upsetting reality."

But Klebold's father apparently sensed his son's role in Tuesday's horror. Before any of the suspects had been identified, Thomas Klebold contacted authorities through an intermediary, saying his son might be involved and offering to help.

Earlier this month, the National Education Association marked the one-year anniversary of other school shootings in Pennsylvania, Arkansas and Oregon by noting successful programs to help teachers "spot warning signals emitted by troubled, violence-prone youth."

Last fall, the U.S. Conference of Mayors adopted a national "action plan" to combat school violence that urged the importance of taking key signs of youth violence seriously, including substance abuse, failing grades and anti-social behavior.

"At this point, anyone has to consider any kind of a threat. That has to be taken seriously," says Betty Yung, director of the Center for Child and Adolescent Violence Prevention at Wright State University in Ohio. "Even if we overreact in the schools or the home or community settings, we're better off doing that than ignoring it."

Garbarino says much of the time people have nowhere to take their concerns about disturbing behaviors such as obsession with violence. "There are so many people involved in a kid's life that nobody has a clear picture of the child's entire experience," he says.

But that is cold consolation for Columbine students who lost friends - and their innocence - in this week's terrible event.

School officials "act as if they never knew that these people were around the school," says Jonathan Vandemark, another Columbine student. "They were obviously a gang and thought that they could change the world in the way that, I guess, they thought Hitler couldn't finish."