

20 years on, Columbine survivors and victim's father offer words of encouragement to their younger selves

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On April 20, 1999, two gunmen killed 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Amy Over was a senior at Columbine. Kacey Johnson, was a junior. Tom Mauser's son, Daniel, was a sophomore.

Now, nearly 20 years later, we asked these members of the Columbine community to reflect on the two decades since the shooting, in notes to their younger selves.

Below are Kacey Johnson, Amy Over and Tom Mauser's full notes, which were edited for time on "CBS This Morning."



Kacey Johnson **CBS NEWS**

Kacey Johnson

Dear Kace,

For the first time in your life, you feel confident. You've overcome loss and depression and are now starting your junior year at a new high school. This summer, you are planning to represent Colorado in the World Quarter Horse Championships. But you won't make it there. Your world is about to change in the most unpredictable way.

Today will be like any other school day until, instead of heading home for lunch as always, you will end up in the school library. You will find yourself in the midst of a national tragedy. You will hide under a computer desk, quietly pleading with God to save you. You'll simultaneously feel the gut punch of evil as the shooters enter the library, and a strong invisible hand on your shoulder providing an unexplainable peace. You are about to hear things, smell things, see things, and experience things that no teenager should ever know. A slug from a shotgun fired at close range will turn the bones in your shoulder, arm, and hand to dust, and burn a path across the front of your throat. You will have the clarity of mind to slump down and pretend you are dead, convincing the shooter that his business with you is finished. Take comfort in your faith, knowing that what is intended as evil, can and will be used for good.

Your survival will be miraculous. A team of doctors will create a one-of-a-kind plan using donated cadaver bones to save your arm from amputation. Still, your now disabled body and mind will cause pain, anxiety, PTSD, flashbacks and paranoia. The faith and character that grew from the difficulties of your sophomore year will help you; you have thrived after difficult circumstances before. You can do so again. A year later, you will ride in the World Quarter Horse Championships. It will feel like a major victory...use it as a building block for many more victories to come.

Over time, you will begin to notice the good things in life again. Growing out of your shy and timid youth, you will learn to use your story as a public speaker and author to encourage others and to advocate for bone and tissue donation. Inspired by the kind and faithful hospital nurses who cared for you, you will begin a career as an oncology nurse. But your disabilities will limit your nursing career. Do not despair, another career as a mother is on its way. You will marry your Prince Charming, and welcome four beautiful babies into your family. As you send your own children to school each day ...remember... every person has a story and difficulties in life that provide opportunity for growth. Each of us gets to choose how the bad things in life will impact us. Continue to be brave. Choose freedom from fear. Do not allow the troubles in your life to hold your heart and mind. You will realize that although you would never have chosen the terrible

events in your life, you will be thankful for all the lessons they have taught you. The journey will be tough, but you will not only survive, you will thrive.

Continue to spread hope,

Kacey



Amy Over CBS NEWS

Amy Over

Dear Amy,

You're 18 years old and getting ready for senior prom. You'll party with your friends and dance with your boyfriend. Tonight is an important milestone in your life, but also one that marks the end of your high school journey. A journey that's been a great one for you. One where you've built great friendships, achieved popularity and stood out as the basketball team's star point guard.

Tuesday morning you'll meet with Dave Sanders, your basketball coach and mentor, to discuss a college scholarship offer. Coach will be so proud of you, he'll say, "You have so much heart, Amy. I knew you could do it." Two hours later you'll find yourself hiding from gun shots under a cafeteria table. As you crouch in fear with your classmates, you see coach telling us to run, to "get out". You take his advice and run to the door. As you look back you will see your coach for

the last time. Coach Sanders and 12 students won't make it out. You'll get out safely, your wounds are invisible.

You spend the days that follow attending vigils, funerals and finishing out high school at a nearby school. But mostly, you cry. You will walk around for weeks in a daze, confused about your new normal. You will struggle in the aftermath, feeling guilty that you survived. You become angry and feel as though no one understands. Your sense of safety and trust has been stolen from you. You can't sit with your back to an exit, you fall to the ground in fear when you hear loud noises, and you're even afraid to travel by plane. You'll go on a summer trip to meet your new basketball team; but now you're "the girl from Columbine." Broken. Your coach is gone, basketball isn't the same, you're not the same. Trust your heart. Stay home and GET HELP! Seek counseling, find support, and start putting yourself back together before you move on.

Twenty years later, you'll have two beautiful children and be married to the love of your life. He'll show you a path forward, even when you couldn't see one, and you'll walk it together. Some days, Columbine will feel like scenery in the distance. Other days it will feel like an insurmountable roadblock. The first time you drop your daughter off at school, you'll have a panic attack, fearing she too will not be safe in the classroom. It's a chronic disorder you'll battle for years. Tell your kids not to worry...we can't live our lives in fear. Own your story...You will discover your own power and join The Rebels Project, a support group for other mass shooting survivors. You'll travel around the country, share your story, and help others like the kids in Parkland and Paducah. Persevere, ask for help, and embrace love and empathy. It will allow you to move beyond life's difficult moments and reach the beautiful ones.

Stay strong, you've got a lot of great times ahead.

Love,

Amy



Tom Mauser

Dear Tom,

You're 47. You've had a really good life. A loving wife. Two terrific kids—Daniel and Christie. You're so proud of them—Christie's charm, Daniel's intelligence. You've never faced any great loss or devastation in your life—other than your father dying when you were ten. You'll not be very prepared for what you're about to face...

You will now mark all your life by what happened before and after April 20, 1999, the day your world will be turned upside down; you'll be at work watching the news coverage, but will be in denial that something bad could happen to Daniel...until hours pass with no word from him. The day will stretch into two, as it will take nearly 24 hours to be officially notified that your only son was one of the students killed. You will face a parent's worst nightmare—the loss of a child. Stay strong—it won't be easy. Find balance in your life, grieving yet always looking for hope and healing in all you do.

In the years after, you will find inspiration in Daniel. You will remember how he overcame his weaknesses, how he was so very shy, yet chose to join the debate team. You will discover that Daniel was the same shoe size when you clear out his closet. You will start wearing his shoes to symbolize how you too can

overcome your own shyness and join this great debate about making stronger gun laws.

You will find inspiration by doing things to honor Daniel, to make sure the world remembers the victims, not the killers. You will have a president honor him. You will establish a memorial website in his name. You will make him proud by doing something you never planned or could have imagined--adopting a baby girl from China, giving the time you would have given him to another child, and bring healing to your family.

Twenty years later, you will now face a painful anniversary. You'll appreciate the way others honor those who died, but you know you face the reality of your loss every day, not just on the anniversary. This one day is just so much more painful, a day you just can't WAIT to pass. Yet you will look back and be pleased with what you've done to keep his memory alive, what you've done to change gun laws in his name. You will continue to be guided by the thought that Daniel would want you to be happy again, not stuck in perpetual grief. When you speak publicly you will continue to wear these old Vans shoes, the very shoes he was wearing on April 20, 1999. Take solace in the fact you will proudly walk in Daniel's shoes for the rest of your life.