

The Victims: Never Again

By Andrew Goldstein/Littleton Sunday, Dec. 12, 1999

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A MOM'S LOVE: Mark Taylor's bedroom is filled with good wishes, but he's often ill at ease

For some of the families of the dead children of Columbine, the very idea of "closure" is an insult and a hoax. There can never be closure for them. "To say that we want to move on and put this behind us, that's not true," says Brian Rohrbough, whose son Daniel was among the first to die. There is still too much pain and too many questions, and even if the answers come, their children will never come back, and nothing will be the same again.

And so, he is still burning. His rage starts with the killers. Rohrbough is the one who took down the two crosses meant to commemorate the shooters alongside the victims. But he has other culprits in his sights. "For 20 minutes the Jefferson sheriff knew absolutely where Klebold and Harris were in the building," he says. "For 20 minutes they listened to them murdering children, and they did absolutely nothing." As for the school, he charges, "jocks could get away with anything. If they wanted to punch a kid in the mouth and walk away, they could. Had I known this, my son wouldn't have been there. They did nothing to protect students from each other."

At a glance it would be easy to conclude that the Columbine community is still shattered in pieces--angry, frightened, heartbroken. On the six-month anniversary of the shooting in October, a Columbine senior threatened to "finish the job" started by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, and hundreds of panicked parents kept their kids home from school. Some fired off angry letters saying that when it comes to the safety of their kids, the school is still "in denial." Two days later, Carla Hochhalter, the mother of Anne Marie, who was paralyzed in the April 20 shootings, walked into the Alpha Pawn Shop, asked to see a gun and shot herself. Michael Shoels, whose son Isaih was murdered, appeared at a rally with Al Sharpton, ranting against the killers' parents and the police. "I'm as angry as the day it happened," says Shoels. And 18 families filed notices of intent to sue the school district, the sheriff's office or both.

But beneath all the public outrage, there are signs that most of the victims of Columbine have been quietly piecing their lives back together. The victims' families have written thousands of thank-you notes, have created scholarships in the names of their children, and are trying to raise money to build a new library. Students and teachers have managed to have a relatively normal school year, and many are using April 20 as inspiration to rethink the way they treat their peers. All say they are committed to finding ways to ensure that a tragedy like this doesn't happen again, anywhere.

Even the growing pile of potential lawsuits is not what it appears. The families insist they are less interested in blame or recompense, than simply answers. A few do need money because of mounting medical bills. Expenses for Richard Castaldo, who is paralyzed from the waist down, could top \$1 million. Mark Taylor, who has had four operations and faces a long, painful road to recovery, needed an \$1,800 therapeutic mattress, but his HMO refused to pay for it, and the family had to find other means. "If the insurance companies aren't doing their job," asks Donna Taylor, "then what are we supposed to do but sue?"

Most families filed intents to sue simply because the sheriff's office had not yet finished its report by the time Colorado's 180-day deadline to file such intents came, and the families wanted to keep their options open in case the report fails to answer the questions that have haunted them since April. Why didn't the police or the school pick up on the killers' warning signs? Why, once the carnage began, didn't the police move in faster? "We'd love to know exactly what happened," says Darcey Ruegsegger, whose daughter Kacey is recovering from a shotgun wound in the back. "Not to blame, but just to know. If there were mistakes made, then by learning perhaps we can prevent something like this from happening again."

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, many of the victims' families gathered at St. Luke's Church for their monthly potluck dinner. Few of these families had even met before April 20, but the tragedy has brought them together. "They're my family now," says Don Fleming. "They have become our closest friends." They sit around, tell stories and support one another. After Carla Hochhalter killed herself, Ted Hochhalter was left to care for Anne Marie by himself. The parents of Corey DePooter, who was killed at Columbine, gave the Hochhalters a freezer they had received as a gift, and they--along with other families of the dead--stocked it with food.

With the pain of the six-month anniversary behind them, the families were finding joy in taking baby steps: Kacey Ruegsegger, who was a world-class quarter-horse rider before the blast shattered her

right arm and shoulder, is back in the saddle again, competing even though after bone transplants and three operations she still might never have full use of her arm. Richard Castaldo, whose eight gunshot wounds left him a paraplegic, has spent four months in the hospital and suffered through seven operations, but now he's back at Columbine. Every day a special lift hoists Richard and his black wheelchair into the big yellow Bluebird school bus that can seat 72 passengers but is reserved just for him; Richard plans to graduate with his class in June.



RICHARD CASTALDO: After seven operations and four months in the hospital, Richard still doesn't have the finger coordination to master the saxophone, his true love. Yet he's back playing with the school band, now on percussion. "There's nothing to be angry at now," he says. "But I do want to get better"

Families that kept their dead children's rooms locked up since April 20 have finally begun to open the doors: Dee Fleming goes inside her daughter Kelly's room with Kelly's friends, listens to stories about her daughter and invites the girls to take home special keepsakes. The Mausers had always slept with their son Daniel's door closed, but since summer they've kept it open. Patricia Depooter takes comfort in going into her son's room, gazing at his clothes and shoes as he left them that April morning, and even taking an occasional whiff of his cologne.

It's still hard for Linda Sanders to talk about her husband Dave, the much loved teacher and coach who died while heralding kids to safety, without welling up with tears. By the end of November, she still had not gone back to the campus. Every time she had been inside the school, she was walking with Dave or going to pick him up or watch him coach. Returning, she feared, would destroy all those positive memories. But last week was the opening game for the girls' basketball team, which Dave had coached. The girls from the team have regularly stopped by Linda's house with gifts or just to talk and keep her company. So Linda decided to support the girls on opening night. "It was definitely a big step for me," she says. "But I know I wasn't alone. I was with Dave every step of the way." The girls went out and won handily, for Linda and for coach Sanders.

The families at the potluck gathering were putting together laundry baskets for the needy. They filled 40 baskets--donated by the Denver Foundation--with clothing, food, soap and lotions, and drove

them to shelters and charities. "This is a club nobody wants to join," says Bob Curnow, whose 14-year-old son Steven was killed, "but now we need to be role models, to create something positive out of all that's happened."

And they are. Patricia DePooter, whose son Corey had always wanted to be a Marine, helps the Corps collect toys and other gifts for impoverished kids. Linda Sanders, who says all the support from across the nation "has restored my faith in humanity," has written 1,700 thank-you cards, but she's worried she's missed some people. Next fall the Mausers plan to adopt a baby girl from China.

And together, many of the victims' families have formed the HOPE (Healing of People Everywhere) library fund. Last week the families announced hope's campaign to raise at least \$3.1 million to build a new library adjacent to the school and to tear away the floor of the existing library to create a stunning two-story atrium with a view of the Rockies. "The library is a kind of sanctuary. It was the heart and soul of the school," says Don Fleming. "How could you go in and concentrate, knowing that 10 kids were murdered there?"

In early November, several of the victims' families came together under different circumstances to testify at the sentencing hearing of Mark Manes, the 22-year-old acquaintance of Klebold's and Harris' who bought Dylan's semiautomatic Tec-9. With their suicide pact, Harris and Klebold had cheated their victims of a day in court, so this hearing might be the only chance for the families to describe in a court of law what they've been through. Representatives from nine families spoke, and the stories of suffering were so wrenching that several people had to leave the courtroom and a clerk had to get three extra boxes of tissues. When Manes was finally escorted out of the courtroom in handcuffs, sentenced to six years in prison, the families clapped. It wasn't much, but it was the first sense of justice they had got since April.

At the hearing, Tom Mauser was the only speaker who did not focus on the loss of his son. Instead, Mauser talked about guns. "I want you to consider," he told the courtroom, "that we lose an average of 13 young lives every day to gunshots. Every day. Every day."

Two weeks before the shootings, Daniel Mauser came home from school and asked his parents if they knew about the loopholes in the Brady Bill. Looking back, says Mauser, "that was a sign." His fight against gun violence is his way of honoring Daniel's memory. Mauser protested the n.r.a. convention held in Denver two weeks after the shootings; he picketed the offices of Colorado's U.S. Senators Wayne Allard and Ben Nighthorse Campbell after they voted to keep background checks at gun shows voluntary; and he's joined the Bell Campaign, a group that lobbies against gun violence.

"There's something wrong with a country when a kid can get a gun so easily and shoot that gun into the face of another kid, like my child," says Mauser. "Unfortunately it looks like it's going to take a lot more of these tragedies for real change to occur."



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ADAM KECHTER: His older brother Matt used to play lineman for the football team. When Matt died, the team adopted Adam, 13. Two weeks ago, Columbine won the state football championship. Afterward the team presented Adam with the trophy

Students at Columbine don't want to wait that long. Eleven of them--their backgrounds as diverse as can be hoped for in this mostly white, Abercrombie and Fitch community--spend an hour one morning sitting around the conference table in the front office. They're brainstorming about what they've learned from their tragedy, and what they plan to do so that it never happens again. "I don't tease my friends as much as I used to," says freshman Kent Van Zant. "I try to be a lot nicer now to everybody."

Senior Joel Kuhns, who was in Harris' video class last year, says that this year, "a lot of seniors have been more open to people, even to underclassmen. This is the class that they're going to look at to see what happened afterward. I just think that's a huge responsibility for us, and we're doing a pretty good job of it." Adds Lindsey White, who serves in the senior senate: "There are still cliques. You're going to get that no matter what. But more people are willing to talk to other people they don't usually talk to."

All summer, principal Frank DeAngelis has been listening. He spent July and August serving on two school-safety task forces, reviewing everything from metal detectors to dress codes to having four or five armed officers patrol school grounds. "I'm not sure if that's the answer," says DeAngelis. "I think where money needs to be spent is educating our students about tolerance, about respecting one another, about communication." While Columbine High School did add an additional campus supervisor this year, along with 16 security cameras and a keyless entry system, DeAngelis is most proud of Columbine's efforts at prevention: the Links program that pairs upperclassmen with incoming freshmen; the emphasis on "zero tolerance" of threats and harassment; the hiring by the school district of Jackson Katz, a consultant who speaks to coaches and athletes about using their status to be role models, and the peer-counselor program, in which senior leaders can help identify students in need of support. At Columbine's opening-day rally in August, DeAngelis urged all students "who don't feel part of the Columbine family" to come to his office and let him know why.

In September a Columbine student expressed to victim parent Bob Curnow what many of her peers were feeling. "I just want everything to get back to normal," she said. Curnow told her: "I understand

what you're feeling. But you need to know that normal, before April 20, will never occur to you again. You need to redefine what normal is with this event as part of your life." And so it is with everyone in this community, and maybe in the nation too. We suffer through tragedies, we grieve, and we try to learn.