

Among the Crusaders

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Some say he's just plain crazy. But Greg Zanis says he's crazy for crosses. He thinks of them while he's awake, and sees them in his dreams. At his Aurora, Illinois, home, he has them in his backyard for his dead pets, and in his china cabinet next to the Trans Am models. "I live crosses, I breathe crosses, I eat crosses," he says. Literally, it seems. "Sometimes, I even cut my hamburger patty out to look like a cross," Zanis admits. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm a cross-o-maniac or something."

It's understandable. After all, Greg is the Cross Man, best known for his memorial erected after the Columbine massacre. But it started about four years ago, when Zanis, 49, began a cross-building hobbyhorse called Crosses for Losses on top of his \$80,000-a-year carpentry business. The name suited him, for Greg knew about crosses. He grew up around crosses -- beautiful and Byzantine -- as the son of a Greek Orthodox priest named Stavros ("*stavros*" being Greek for "cross"). Greg also knows about losses. He lost his dignity at Geneva High School in Illinois, as a non-athletic, helium-voiced Greek kid ridiculed by sturdier WASPs who called him "Zorba" and worse (his father's advice on confrontation was "Always run"). Then he lost the respect of his family when he became a born-again Christian in the late '70s. Zanis says they thought he'd lost a screw, which is confirmed by his estranged brother Chris, whom I accidentally reach while searching for Greg. Chris, who's had periodic trouble with the law (Greg calls him "my Billy Carter"), volunteers a profanity-riddled rundown of his brother's frailties: from his spotty church attendance to pot usage.

Greg freely admits this, but says it's well behind him. "I could've lost my family," Greg says of his evil-weed chapter.

Greg's biggest loss, however, came in 1996, when he went to the house of his father-in-law, a wealthy landlord who was also his best friend and carpentry mentor. Zanis found him dead -- face down in a pool of blood, shot in the eye by thieving ex-tenants. Even today when he recounts the episode, Greg's tannery-issued skin turns sallow. It was then he went on a cross-building mission. He planted crosses in front yards and by highways. Wherever tragedy struck, whether from homicides or car accidents, Zanis set out under cloak of night, planting crosses for gangbangers and drunks and innocent victims, at no cost to the families. He regarded it not just as a commemorative act, but as a witness. "I don't plant crosses for the dead, I plant them for the living," he says. He also puts Stars of David up for Jews, crescents for Muslims, even flames for atheists, not because he agrees with them, but as an act of kindness to grieving strangers, to show them "what Christianity is about."

But Greg didn't *really* become the Cross Man, as seen on *Inside Edition* and the *Today* show, until last year. Greg, his wife, and their five children were taking their first vacation in over a decade, renting a house with an inground pool in Kissimmee, Florida. When Greg got a call from Littleton residents after the shootings, he bailed on the Disney vacation, drove back to Aurora, and went to Home Depot, where he's a regular in the pressure-treated lumber department.

Greg spent the rest of the night fashioning 15 eight-foot crosses from knotholed pine; then he and his teenage son loaded his pickup truck and drove straight through to Littleton. There, they anonymously planted the crosses -- 13 for the victims, 2 for the killers -- atop Rebel Hill, the Clement Park elevation that overlooks the school. And they went home. The crosses became the enduring image of the Columbine shootings. While thousands flocked to them -- weeping, inscribing, leaving stuffed mementos --

others were enraged Zanis had included crosses for the killers. Zanis, who maintains the Bible mandates forgiveness even when it hasn't been asked for, differentiated the killers' crosses so subtly that most missed it: He wrote the murderers' names in Greek script -- to "mark them as heathens," since Greeks, in the New Testament, always represented the ungodly. But the distinction was lost on Brian Rohrbough, father of murdered Daniel, who maintains that there is no forgiveness without repentance, and a double suicide after 13 homicides doesn't count.

Rohrbough went to rebel Hill and removed the killers' crosses, chopping them up with his circular saw and throwing them in a dumpster. When word reached Zanis, he returned to Columbine, ascended the hill, and took the rest of his crosses home. "The scene was desecrated," says Zanis. But before he even reached Aurora, hundreds of people had called Zanis to ask him to return the 13 crosses. He constructed a second set (minus the two killers', a concession to the families) and took them back to Rebel Hill. Eventually, park officials took the second set into custody, after church-state segregationists complained.

As soon as Zanis gets his second set sprung from a federal warehouse, he says, they're promised to the Smithsonian. And while Sotheby's has been panting to auction off the originals, Zanis doesn't want the money. Instead, he keeps the crosses in the back of his Chevy Silverado, vowing that the final resting place for "my babies" will be a 13-story nickel-and-glass Cross Building in Littleton. Greg keeps a model of the building, fashioned from aluminum ducts, in his woodshop. And if all goes according to plan, and the funds can be raised to erect the building on a donated parcel, Greg says there will be a floor for every victim, filled with the shrineside memorabilia that blanketed the park, perhaps even featuring the bedrooms of the departed, assuming the parents consent to have their children's rooms severed from their homes and transported to this "living memorial."

If Greg's well-intentioned plan seems a tad morbid, it ranks pretty low on the scale of random acts of tastelessness that have followed on the Columbine tragedy. The children hadn't even been buried before the suckerfish moved in to score polemic points on everything from gun control to school vouchers. The sheriff's department, slow to disclose much (its final report is seven months overdue), managed to let fly, without presenting evidence, that it was likely Cassie Bernall was not the one who said "yes" she believed in God before getting shot in the head. Even the parents behaved questionably. The Klebolds threatened to sue the sheriff's department for not warning them that their son was associating with his co-murderer, Eric Harris. And Michael Shoels, father of the slain Isaiah, hooked up with Dr. Kevorkian's attorney, leveled wild-eyed government conspiracy charges, and threatened to sue the school system and nine law enforcement agencies, boycott the United Way, and embark with James Brown on a "Let's Stomp Out Hate" tour.

But the first anniversary of the April 20 massacre threatens to take the prize. So many journalists are planning to envelop Littleton that one victim's family told me their relatives can't get a hotel room. The Jefferson County school system has trademarked the anniversary logo "A Time to Remember, A Time to Hope," as if it were a prom theme. Grief counselors are warning that even non-victims who watch television coverage can experience "trauma triggers." And all manner of publicity jockeys are conducting events like the Columbine Memorial 5K Run, where entrants can pay \$ 20 and receive a T-shirt, a "Winning Time chip," and a "special hope and remembrance bib."

There is, however, another subculture flourishing in the aftermath of Columbine. It is by no means devoid of publicity-hungry opportunism, but opportunism seeking eternal, as well as temporal, advantages. Since nearly half the victims were devout Christians, and since the killers left behind much evidence to suggest they were

targeting Christians, tales of the students' lives have taken on a life of their own. Despite the Cassie controversy, her parents' book about their daughter's faith became a *New York Times* bestseller. There is now a network of "Yes I Believe" Bible study groups, and a play depicting Cassie's life is being performed in churches nationwide.

Then there is, indelicate as it sounds, the Columbine roadshow. This nationwide revival tour is helmed by Darrell Scott, father of the murdered Rachel Scott, herself a devout Christian who had actually spoken about Christ to Klebold and Harris. Scott, the son of a Pentecostal minister, has quit his job as a food-sales manager to hit the saw-dust trail and spread what old-time revivalists like to call the Good News. Meeting up with Scott at most of his stops is the Cross Man, displaying the original Columbine crosses.

In addition, Scott has started the Columbine Redemption foundation (see pictures of his daughter's gravesite at www.thecolumbineredemption.com), co-written a book called *Rachel's Tears*, and even launched, in what skeptics will likely find a cringe-inducing endeavor, *Rachel's Journal*, a monthly magazine containing entries from Rachel's journals.

The magazine, the book, and the roadshow all spring from Rachel's diaries, which her parents found after her death. One was discovered in her backpack at Columbine, a bullet-hole through the cover. While some of her writings and illustrations are emotive juvenilia, others are chillingly premonitory. A drawing done half an hour before her death shows her eyes crying 13 tears, which are watering a rose. The rest of her writing is the astonishing interior monologue of a 17-year-old girl wrestling with God, as the Psalmist did, and struggling to subjugate her earthly fears and desires so that her life (or, as it turned out, her death) would be used to bring others to Him.

Greg and Darrell first met at Rachel's grave shortly after the shooting. Since then, Greg has been on the road, showing his crosses, for 300 days. His business has gone to seed, his family is strangled by debt. To finance his Columbine habit, he has taken out a \$ 100,000 home equity loan. He says he's \$ 2,000 away from going broke, so he's now "walking on faith." Several people I talk to liken Greg to John the Baptist. "Why?" he asks when I inform him of this. "Because I'm sweaty?" Not exactly. Like most itinerant prophets, Greg is slightly unhinged. And as we hop into his truck for the nine-hour hike to Darrell's next preaching gig in Stanford, Kentucky, Greg's eccentricities are laid bare. To save money, Greg sleeps in his truck. On warm nights, he sleeps in the back, right on the crosses. He rarely stays in hotels, because he doesn't want to lie in beds where prostitutes have "done their business." On the rare occasions he comes in from the elements, Greg will sleep only in the bathtub. No hotel, of course, means no shower, which is why Greg has perfected what he calls his "Toilet Shower." The technique involves taking his cooler into a rest-stop, filling it with water, proceeding into a roomy handicapped stall, and sponging himself off onto the floor. "I like to be clean," he says.

While John the Baptist are locusts and honey, Greg is less discriminating. His Playmate cooler is packed so that he can subsist out of cans: corn niblets, Bumblebee tuna mixed with tomato paste, Louisiana Perfect hot sauce (which he takes straight, like Binaca), and Lady Lee chili hot beans. I beg Greg not to eat the Lady Lee while I'm in his cab, and as I promise a big day on expense account, his only request is breakfast -- Whoppers at Burger King. After he brushes his teeth without water, wiping the bristles on the five-inch cuff of his jeans, he is full of highway tales. One night, while sleeping in a stadium parking lot in the Texas panhandle, he awoke to the shotgun blasts of coyote hunters, who nearly blew the windows out of his truck. Then there was the time he traveled to a Teen Mania revival where the organizers wanted to

display the Columbine crosses through a concert-style pyrotechnic wall of fire. "I carried my crosses out of there three at a time," he snarls. "I was gone."

It's all worthwhile, he says, especially at night, after the revivals. "I'm sleeping by the crosses, I'm witnessing all night long," he says. Greg is often jarred from sleep, as "men will come to the crosses at night and cry. They won't do it in front of their wives or girlfriends." His family misses him, but they seem to understand he must carry the crosses, even as Christ roamed the countryside before he went to the cross. "I've got it easy," says Greg. "He took a donkey or walked. I get to drive."

Lately, however, the road's been wearing Greg down. Greg is not stoic. He has grievances -- including lots against Darrell Scott. Though Greg refuses to sign a contract with Darrell, he says Darrell hasn't been paying him the agreed \$ 1,000 a week, and even that wouldn't go far. It costs \$ 500 a week to stay on the road eating Lady Lee. Though the sum Greg says Darrell owes frequently changes, it ranges up to \$ 40,000. Greg says Darrell told him recently he didn't have the money to cut him a \$ 2,000 check, though Darrell makes as much as \$ 5,000 an appearance (not including airfare and hotel). If Darrell doesn't have the money, Greg wonders, why did Darrell just buy a new Mercedes?

Greg, it seems, is given to slight exaggeration. Darrell actually leased a Mercedes, only after he and his wife traded in their two cars. Forty thousand dollars is about \$ 34,000 more than Darrell says he owes Greg for services rendered -- and he's not contractually obligated to pay him anything. While Darrell can make up to \$ 5,000 an appearance, the money goes to his foundation, he says, and he's had to skip checks himself to pay his contract employees. His salary is less than he made as a food salesman.

Listening to the complaints, I feel as if I've stumbled onto the evangelical equivalent of Martin and Lewis's sunset years, as the act was about to unravel. Darrell and Greg are booked well into the fall, but feelings have been hurt, allegiances betrayed. Still, amidst the lolling hills in the Knobs region of Kentucky, with the bluegrass, freshly cut, looking like two-toned velour, the roadshow goes on. In the Lincoln County High School gym, the Baptist Association is hosting about 2,000 attendees for a week-long revival that will feature marquee names like Miss Kentucky and a Channel 36 newscaster. But tonight is Columbine night. Greg unloads the cross pedestals first, then checks his laminated lineup sheet to place the crosses in correct order, 13 abreast in the lobby. As he does so, gawkers congregate, tearing up, unable to articulate the power of the crosses that were once a stack of wood in an Aurora Home Depot, but that are now something else entirely.

Inside, the bleachers fill, as the choir -- a sea of pastel jackets and henna rinses -- softly sings "Beulah Land." Darrell takes the stage, and after a day of listening to Greg's complaints, I half expect him to start pitching time-shares at a Jesus-themed waterpark. But, except for the "Rachel's Tears" T-shirt concession in the lobby, I'm pleasantly surprised. It's clear that whatever his faults, Darrell Scott is a man who believes. He believes there is a reason why, a year ago, he kept hearing the words "a spiritual event" as he went to a holding pen for anxious parents after the shooting -- where he watched the last surviving child get off the last bus and saw that she was not his daughter. He believes that God still talks through people, and that He spoke through Rachel, and that the reason Darrell is leading this awkward life -- where tragedy becomes vocation -- is that it's his job to relate his daughter's words -- words like "God, I want you to use me to reach the unreachable" -- to anyone who'll listen. Darrell Scott believes that souls are at stake, that today's decisions hold eternal consequences. And he believes that when Greg rustles up volunteers to carry the Columbine crosses to the front of the stage, people might actually understand this.

Darrell believes that because his daughter did something as simple as go to school last April 20, now, a year later, several hundred people here in rural Kentucky will flood the court during the altar call, as if the basketball team had just won the state championship, and stand before the crosses.

Darrell gives the invitation, and only one person comes. He presses for more, and though souls have been stirred, there are no additional takers. Finally, Wayne Bristow, the host evangelist, takes the microphone, and does what any good evangelist who learned his craft in Muleshoe, Texas, would do. Wayne draws the net, as the pros say. Wayne is a closer. A few words, a few prayers, and before you know it, the gym rumbles with the sounds of 250 or so people stomping down the wooden bleachers to stand before the crosses, to meet with counselors in the cafeteria, and to make decisions that will affect their lives here, and perhaps in the hereafter.

After the service, things get messy. Greg and I adjourn to a nearby Denny's. Darrell hunts us down, as he's desperate to discuss business with Greg. Greg has been ducking Darrell, as he is not anxious to hear Darrell's bad news: that some Columbine victims' families oppose Greg's participation in any April 20 commemorations in Littleton because Greg has gradually abandoned his pledge not to post crosses for the killers. While he never does so with the victims' families present, Greg often plants two minuscule crosses in holes next to the 13 crosses when he's traveling outside Colorado. There are other things to hash out -- such as Darrell's desire to get Greg under contract and retain ownership of the crosses -- but not in front of a reporter. So Darrell slides into our booth and waits impatiently as Greg finishes his omelet. Darrell insists we drive back to the Holiday Inn Express, a half-mile away, where they will get rid of me well after mid-night. They go at it in the parking lot for over an hour.

It feels a bit like a drug deal gone bad, and such pettiness might seem to diminish the message. Then again, biblical precedent suggests that God's had plenty of practice

delivering His message through imperfect messengers. David was a wife-stealer, and Noah was not above sprawling naked while tying on a drunk. Peter was a coward, and Paul, before becoming an uber-Christian, used to murder Christians by the dozen. If God can use cowards and adulterers, lushes and killers, surely He can work with two messengers haggling over the crosses of dead children in a Holiday Inn parking lot.