

Terror and Tears: Inside Columbine High

By Tom Kenworthy and Joel Achenbach
Washington Post Staff Writers
Wednesday, April 21, 1999

Columbine High School, "Home of the Rebels," is a big place with a couple of thousand students. It's the kind of school where you don't know everyone, where there are clubs and cliques and subcultures, where a dozen or so strange kids can form something called the Trench Coat Mafia, obsess about death, make a video about their new guns – and it's just part of the scene.

Yesterday the killers came to school across the soccer field. It was 11:30 in the morning on a spring day in Littleton, Colo., in the Denver suburbs.

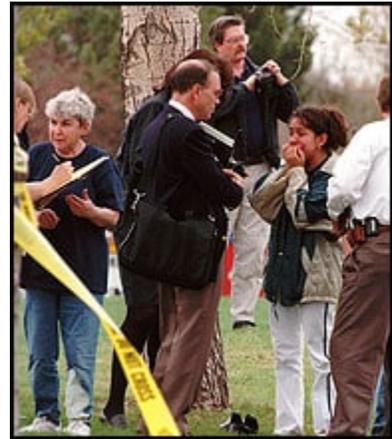
There were two of them, juniors in high school, wearing black trench coats. They opened fire as soon as they reached the parking lot.

Mindy Pollock, 10th-grader:

"I was walking out to go to a friend's car and I heard what sounded like firecrackers. And I saw two kids, one in a big black trench coat with a handgun and one on top of the ledge with a huge gun. And they were shooting. I saw kids just drop to the ground. The one with the shotgun shot a couple of them right there. We didn't know what it was. My friends, they were, like, 'it could be a fake gun.' But then I saw a kid on the ground and he couldn't move and I said it's not fake."

It was horribly, viscerally real. Students and teachers began running in every direction. Wade Frank, a senior eating lunch in a picnic area, heard popping sounds and saw a girl fall to the ground – shot in the leg. One gunman approached a fleeing boy and fired straight into his back. "Just point-blank. He had a gun two feet long. Maybe a sawed-off. He was just casually walking. He wasn't in any hurry," Frank said.

The killers went to the cafeteria. They threw a homemade bomb onto the floor. As they opened fire they giggled, survivors said. Like television villains they explained their motives as they went: They were seeking revenge for being outcasts. Several students said the gunmen were targeting athletes and minorities.



People are interviewed outside Columbine High School. Students later described the terror and ensuing carnage during the two gunmen's shooting rampage. (AP Photo/Denver Rocky Mountain News, Hal Stoezlze)

Chris Wisher, a sophomore, said the gunmen were armed with bombs, a shotgun, a handgun and a third weapon that he said was "like an Uzi." Wisher and a friend, Jonathan Vandemark, 16, spent an agonizing two hours trapped with dozens of other students inside a biology classroom.

Josh Nielsen, a junior, heard what sounded like someone pounding on lockers. Then the fire alarm went off. Surely, he thought, it was just another drill. Then he saw smoke in a hallway.

"I thought it was a real fire. People were running. Then I saw that the front windows were blown out. Then I heard someone shouting, 'There's somebody shooting,'" Nielsen said.

Upstairs in the choir room, the students were warming up, everyone doing their scales – an ordinary, routine, do-re-mi beginning to class.

A boy suddenly burst into the room, hysterical, saying something about a gunman, about shooting in the cafeteria.

Was it a joke? No – there were people running in the hallway. There were people screaming. From the cafeteria below came the sound of gunfire.

The students had to hide. Kami Vest was one of them. A senior, she went into the tiny office of the choir room, and so did her cousin, Kendra Curry, and eventually 60 students had crammed themselves into the room. They barricaded the door with two desks and a filing cabinet.

There were explosions below.

"You could feel it through the floor. Huge vibrations. Almost like it would be a small earthquake. Everything was shaking," said Vest.

They were crying, praying. They didn't want to make any noise. Then they heard seven more shots.

"That's when everyone started panicking again," said Curry, another senior. "There were a lot of people hyperventilating, and a lot of people were like zombies, they didn't say anything, they were in complete shock. I was in shock. I didn't believe it was happening. It was like I was in a dream."

Cell Phone Play-by-Play

Even as the rampage was taking place, terrified students used their cellular telephones to make calls to parents – and to television stations. One student hiding under a desk gave a play-by-play. The gunmen were downstairs, killing people.

"I'm just staying underneath this desk. I'm staying up here," he whispered.

Another gave an eyewitness report: "They have masks on. They're wearing black masks."

In the office of the choir room, the heat became oppressive. Some students began to faint. Several had asthma attacks.

Kami Vest: "We were all standing shoulder to shoulder. It got so hot in there that people were starting to pass out. We took the panels off the ceiling so we could get more air in."

The room held a single telephone, but the students were unable to reach 911 – possibly because that option had been disabled to stop students from making prank calls. But eventually a student reached a family acquaintance who worked in law enforcement. That person relayed the location of the trapped students to the SWAT team.

The parents raced to the school. Kami Vest's parents – Kristie and Dale – found themselves behind a yellow police tape at nearby Leaman elementary school.

"They are just all hiding," Kristie Vest said, waiting. "She said she's okay, hiding. They were told not to make any more phone calls."

Unspeakable rumors swept through the crowd of onlookers and reporters.

"I'm petrified," said Sheryl Brace, who waited 200 yards from the school for news of her son, Doug, an 18-year-old senior. "I almost lost him once before in a car accident, so I'm scared to death."

About 2:45 p.m. – after three hours in the office – the students in the choir room heard an officer outside the door.

Curry said the officer announced, "This is the Denver police." He told them to come out in groups of 10.

"Get down on the ground; these people are still in the building," the officer said.

Library, the Last Stop

The killers went to the library, their last stop.

Students were hiding under the desks, but the gunmen found them.

Sophomore Joshua Lapp told reporters: "They were laughing about it. They'd shoot somebody, they'd laugh, they'd giggle, you'd hear a shot go off, you'd hear someone yell and scream, another shot go off and they'd yell and scream, another shot and there would be silence."

A traumatized girl, unidentified, wept uncontrollably as she described on television what happened: "He came into the library and shot everybody around me. Then he put a gun to my head and asked if we all wanted to die and that he was going to kill us if we were of color . . . and if we played sports. I just started screaming and crying and telling him not to shoot me and so he just shot the girl in the head in front of me, and then he shot the black kid because he was black. And he shot him in the face."

Eventually the two gunmen were dead – possibly having turned their weapons on themselves, police said last night. "It appears to be a suicide mission," Sheriff John Stone said.

As student Chris Wisher was hustled out of the building by a SWAT team, he passed three dead students on a staircase, still wearing their backpacks.

Kimberly Lorenz, a senior, waited out the assault with a dozen students and a teacher in a cramped equipment room. Finally someone banged on the door – the police.

"They told us to unlock the door and put our hands above our heads. It was scary, because it was like a whole SWAT team. They told us to turn around and get on our knees and put our hands over our head. Then they told each one of us, one at a time, to stand up, and patted us all down to make sure we weren't carrying any weapons."

The police led the students into the hallway, ordered them to face the wall with their hands raised.

"They turned us around and told us to follow our teacher. We were pretty much jogging. They scooted us out the door," Lorenz said.

The students and teachers were herded from the building in small groups. They were told to keep their hands on their heads, as though they were all suspects. They were frisked, questioned, and offered medical care. Then they were bused to Leaman Elementary to be reunited with family members.

The tension did not easily break. Twenty-three students were in the hospital, 11 in critical or serious condition. Authorities estimate that as many as 25 people, including the gunmen, are dead. Police handcuffed and led away a student believed to be a friend of the gunmen. At 6:15 in the evening, police found an explosive device in a car in the school parking lot. They feared there might still be bombs all over the building.

A spokesman for the sheriff announced that the entirety of Columbine High School is considered a crime scene. The campus was marked off with yellow tape.

All the bodies remained inside.

Kenworthy reported from Denver, Achenbach from Washington. Staff writers Marc Fisher and Amy Goldstein contributed to this report.