

Shades of Gray

*For her book **Gunstories: Life-Changing Experiences With Guns** (HarperCollins), writer-photographer S. Beth Atkin interviewed dozens of teenagers who'd experienced the effects, both positive and negative, of guns on their lives. Some speak of newfound confidence developed by learning to target shoot or hunt, while others recount how crime and violence wreaked havoc on friends and loved ones. One of her subjects, Sarah Davis, had little firsthand experience with guns. But when Davis was a 6th grader, she met Eric Harris, one of the two boys who would later kill 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, before committing suicide. Davis tells Atkin about her history with Harris, her reaction to the shootings, and what she thinks schools need to do to keep other students from taking the same tragic turn.*

People will read this with their own agenda and get out of it what they want. I hope people think that I see both sides of things, but it's a possibility they won't. I've tried to be clear that I think what happened at Columbine was a horrendous act. I don't feel like I'm the best person to talk about what went on that day because I wasn't there. But I do feel like I can give my perspective because I had some experience with somebody who committed a horrible crime. But he wasn't a horrible person. The negative side has been put out there so much. I guess my goal is just to balance it out.

I don't necessarily talk about Columbine and what happened after. I have a few friends that I talk to. I didn't take the time to deal with it right then. To grieve for the loss of a friend was next to impossible because of everything else that was going on. So that's something that I have not done completely. It's now been five years, and just over the past year, I'm just starting to process this. But I mean it's affected every part of my life. It's affected every part.

The day of the shooting, I was outside playing street hockey with my friends. I was 18 then. My mom came to the door and said, "There was another school shooting." And your heart kind of drops. I later came inside with my friends. We were watching TV, flipping through the channels, and saw the school shooting thing. On the bottom of the TV it says where they are, Littleton, Colorado. I just sat there and couldn't move at first. Then I got up and I went in my room. I shut the door and I started bawling. It was awful. And then my mom came down and asked, "What's wrong?" And I couldn't even get the words out. I finally told her, "Littleton. Eric lives in Littleton. That's where the school shooting was and I'm really worried about him."

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The next morning I went to my softball practice and I didn't take my sunglasses off. My eyes were beet red from crying the whole night. When I got home, my dad came out and his eyes were all puffy. He said, "I have bad news. Your friend Eric was one of the shooters." I pretty much broke down there in the driveway.

I didn't talk to anyone about knowing Eric. But this girl who had been at my house when we saw the shooting on TV, I think she called the media. So this is how the whole fiasco with the media got started. I don't want to say it was easy for the media to cover this story, 'cause there was nothing easy about this situation. But they ended up focusing on that Eric was my boyfriend in 6th grade. I thought it was ridiculous that they concentrated on that, instead of the substance of what I had to say.

The problem I have with the media now is they label people negatively and it sticks. You'll never hear me making excuses for what Eric did. He did commit a monstrous act. All I ask is that people take a second and look a little bit deeper, just a little bit. Maybe I'm not going to convince anyone that he wasn't an evil entity or a monster. That's what they made him out to be. I don't even think the word human being was ever used in relation to him. I feel like, by the media not telling the whole story, it was easier for people just to say, "Oh well, those are evil little monsters. We can deal with them because we know who they are." Then they label them as wearing a black trench coat and being angry all the time. The stereotyping led to this situation where the real issues weren't addressed afterward. And if you're looking for answers as to why it happened, or how somebody can go from being your boy next door to the point where they're able to do this-well, maybe if the media had covered it differently, it would shed light on the idea that it was a process.

Eric and I were in 6th grade when we first met, and I was so awkward then. And he was really quiet. We have an Air Force base in Plattsburgh, [New York]. So he was an Air Force base kid. I wouldn't say we were close friends right away. But we became friends and he was like a nice quiet kid. So he was one of my first boyfriends-well, it doesn't really matter. I mean, it was like a 6th grade boyfriend.

It's kind of funny to think back about things we did together. Like we went to the Clinton County Fair with two other kids. I don't like certain rides very much. They were all about to go on one and he came running out so I didn't have to be by myself. He was just a sweetheart. He was a nice kid. I mean, he had friends. It wasn't like he was a loner then. Maybe he was out in Colorado-actually I guess he was, 'cause they wrote and talked about that in the media. But when he was in Plattsburgh, he wasn't like that.

When we first kept in touch, we wrote letters. I have some of them and it's funny to look back and read them, because some of them are really silly. He said things like, "I don't want to see other girls." And we also talked on the phone. There was a time when we lost touch for a little bit, but not that long. Then we got into the Internet. So we would e-mail and didn't talk as much on the phone. But once some of the serious stuff happened-like when he got caught robbing that van-we talked then because he was having some real issues. I think I was 16 or early 17. Then it was every couple of weeks we'd e-mail or talk, and it was always a good thing. I'm a very quiet and not a very emotional person and tend to listen. He tried to be open, and get me to talk about things that were going on in my life. I really liked that about him. He was compassionate.

I remember this one phone conversation, I was standing in my kitchen talking to him. I said, "Why would you do that-break into a van?" He said, "I don't know. It was spur of the moment.We saw it there." I'd like to believe what he said was true. I don't know if it was or not. He told me, "Now I have to deal with this court stuff. My parents are real pissed off." And I said, "OK, you made a mistake. Live with the consequences, learn from it. And move on from there." He said, "I definitely am. I think I'm going to start a new job. I'm playing soccer here. And things are going better."

Later on, I was thinking that Eric had lost a lot of hope for his future. I thought things were getting better with him. But he was having a problem with his after-school plans. He told me he'd gotten rejected from the armed forces. And his college prospects weren't looking up all that much. I don't feel like he thought that he had a lot going for him. After it all happened, I just remember thinking that these were important things. But I don't have an answer to the big question: "How could this have happened?" I would never pretend to have an answer for that.

I guess it was a combination of things that told me something was wrong. I was concerned about the van break-in, and Eric didn't seem to be responding well to his juvenile diversion program. He seemed angry and resentful. I remember sitting with a friend after one of the school shootings that happened before Columbine. I was telling her I was concerned about Eric and that the shooting had made me think of him and it seemed crazy, but I felt like it was something he was capable of. You know it's funny, because he never mentioned guns. I know that one time he sent me this Web site. It was something very dark and creepy. I was surprised and even thought that he had sent me the wrong link to look at.

Sometimes I separate thinking about the Eric I knew from the person who did this shooting. But it really can't be separated. When I found out that Eric was one of the shooters, obviously I was upset. But the reality is I would never say I was shocked. Did he ever say to me, "Sarah, I'm going to go on a shooting rampage at my school?" No. But I just knew it was him. People say he must have said something. But he didn't, and there wasn't any one thing that told me this would happen. I think I will always have to fight the feeling that I could have done something to stop this. But I also have come to see that I wasn't right there with him and I really didn't know it would happen.

What would I want people to know about Eric? My whole point is he was a good person to me and so I know at least part of him was good. I wish people could look at him, or at other young people who have committed horrible acts, as human and capable of doing something good. I understand why people define someone by what they've done, but that one action is not always the whole person.

Every school is going to make kids bring mesh backpacks and have metal detectors and guards. You're just putting a Band-Aid on the problem, you're not fixing it. One thing I recognize as being a positive change is that in certain schools, but not most of them, you see people making an effort and making it a community. They're not letting kids go unnoticed by an adult in their life. I'm not saying that was the situation with Eric. I don't know, I wasn't there. But I saw it at my own high school. There were kids who were allowed to slip through the cracks. And that's not OK. When I'm finished with law school, I would like to help kids and their communities to find better options for juvenile offenders. Yeah, no doubt it has something to do with Eric. Like I said before, this incident affected every part of my life. So it affects my choice about where I want to go and what I want to do, definitely.

What would I say to Eric if he were here right now? My mind doesn't work like that. I'll never have that opportunity, so I don't go there because that doesn't do anything for me. What I do think is, it all comes back to the idea of, if we're ever going to put a stop to things like this, then we need to come to terms with the fact that people who do this, they're human. They're not so different from you and me and you're not going to be able to just pinpoint and figure out who's evil. It doesn't really work that way.