

Small Steps

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Looking out on a sea of nearly 2,000 students, their white shirts emblazoned with the declaration We Are...Columbine, principal Frank DeAngelis had a message to impart: "You are not in this alone. There are people here to support you." And who were those people? First, DeAngelis asked members of the Jefferson County, Colo., school board to raise their hands, then 500 parents and alumni, the faculty and, finally, every member of Columbine High School's four classes—until all hands at last Monday's Take Back Our School rally were aloft. Then the American flag in front of the building, which had been at half staff since April 20, was raised to full flight—and the school year began.

It was an impressive display of enthusiasm and raw determination for a school whose name has been a synonym for senseless slaughter since the unforgettable day last spring when Dylan Klebold, 17, and Eric Harris, 18, killed a dozen students and a teacher and injured another 23 people before turning their guns on themselves. In the intervening four months, the school has undergone a \$1.2 million makeover, "so there is no visible sign of the tragedy," says school district spokeswoman Marilyn Saltzman. There is new vinyl tile in the main corridors, new furniture in the cafeteria and a fresh paint job. The library, scene of the worst carnage, remains closed; a mobile unit has been brought in to house the school's books. Alterations have been made even to the tone of the fire alarm system, which rang nonstop that awful day. As for security, the school now has 16 surveillance cameras and additional lighting. Students are required to wear ID badges, and teachers must carry coded access cards. For the first

month at least, armed security guards will patrol. And there is now a “safe room” where students and staff members can talk with either of the two mental-health workers who have been added to the staff.

The mood was marred, however, on the first two days of school when freshly painted swastikas were found on restroom walls. And there are issues that remain unresolved. Debate rages over what to do with Klebold’s and Harris’s lockers. “It’s a no-win situation,” says Denver psychologist Dr. Audrey Brodt. “If you leave them, it’s a reminder, and if you remove them, it’s still a reminder.” For now, lockers 837 and 624 are locked and unassigned. And though school officials explained that they wanted to emphasize the positive on the day Columbine students returned, some parents sensed a sin of omission. “To me,” said Brian Rohrbough, whose only child, Daniel, 15, was killed last April, “it was rah, rah, rah, let’s forget about the kids who died.”

All but two of the 21 wounded students who didn’t graduate are returning to Columbine. “Since everyone’s been traumatized there,” says Connie Michalik of her son Richard Castaldo, now paralyzed from the waist down, “I think he’ll get more moral support. The teachers and counselors have been trained to look for certain things.” Says Richard: “I just want to be treated the way everybody else is treated.” But as he knows, life for him and many others who were caught in the gunfire will never be quite the same. Here are some of their stories.

COMING BACK THE HARD WAY—THE ONLY WAY

“The hardest part,” says Patrick Ireland, 18, “was dealing with the fact that I didn’t really have a summer— no waterskiing or going out every night with my friends, playing basketball or working.” Instead, the incoming senior with a 4.0 grade average spent his summer at the Craig rehabilitation hospital in

Englewood, Colo., toiling seven hours a day, five days a week, to recover the mental and physical abilities that were disarranged when a bullet tore through the left frontal lobe of his head and another lodged in his right foot. Of his tenacity, he says simply, “I hate to lose.”

That much was evident on April 20, when TV cameras captured a wounded Ireland flinging himself out a library window into the arms of rescuers. What viewers didn't see was how he'd been shot while aiding an injured friend. Ireland no longer recalls most of what happened that day. “I don't know what you call it,” he says, “but there's a period of time I don't remember.”

“Pat has symptoms related to how the path of the bullet and its fragments injured the wires on the left side of the brain,” explains Craig's brain-injury medical director, Dr. Alan Weintraub. “These wires are responsible for communication and language function and movement.” Curiously, Pat's fight back from a mute, partially paralyzed state has been aided by his left-handedness. “A small percentage of left-handers innately have their language center wired differently,” says Weintraub, “which may explain Pat's ability to improve his language beyond expectation.”

Still, his pace of recovery has been frustrating. At first, says Pat's father, John, 45, who develops computer software, “you could see changes day to day.” But now improvement comes more slowly. “Words get mixed up in my head, and I'm not always sure of all the meanings,” says Pat. Once he stood a good chance of being valedictorian. Now, says Weintraub, “Pat's goals are to graduate. We're not talking about normal brain function. He's a very bright kid.” During most of his 73 days at Craig, Pat anticipated a full recovery. “It wasn't until a couple of weeks before I was discharged that I realized the severity of it,” he says. For his parents and sister Maggie, 13, the realization set in with his July 2

homecoming, when, says his mother, Kathy, 47, “we started to focus a little more on the deficits.” Cautions Weintraub, who estimates that Pat’s long-term care could cost millions: “The majority of people who survive this [sort of injury] have a different life.”

Though Pat has known tears and tantrums in his frustration, he is able to enjoy himself (he attended a Shania Twain concert as her guest) and to envision a fulfilling future (his work with a neuropsychologist has led him to consider a career in that field). His parents are encouraged by his attitude, yet their anger is palpable. Kathy says she appreciated a letter from the Klebolds, but is “not to the point where I want to talk with them.” She didn’t pick up the Harris’ letter, sent in care of the sheriff’s office. “I don’t have time to play post office,” she says. Those who exhort Americans to put the tragedy behind leave her cold. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have that luxury,” she says. “We are going to be dealing with the aftermath for the rest of our lives.”

SHOT NINE TIMES, A SCHOOL NEWCOMER CALMLY STARTS OVER

Last winter, Nicole Nowlen wasn’t getting along with her mother, Shawna, in Sioux Falls, S.Dak. So Nicole, 16, decided to move in with her father, Kent, a Denver postal worker. Just seven weeks before tragedy struck, she entered Columbine High as a sophomore.

When the shooting started, Nicole found herself alone under a library table. A boy to her right was alone too, so she crawled to him. “We crunched up real tight and pulled the chairs in around us,” she says. Minutes later, nine bullets pierced her torso. Four exited, and five remain lodged in her body, but none hit a vital organ or caused permanent damage. The boy beside her was killed.

As part of her healing, Nicole found out who he was—John Tomlin—and visited his family. She also went to work, taking a summer job as a cashier at an appliance center. When conversations there turn to the Klebold and Harris families, Nicole refuses to hold them responsible for what their sons did. “People say, ‘You’ve got to blame someone,’ and I say, ‘I just don’t, okay? I don’t blame anyone.’ ” Since her release from the hospital shortly after the shooting, Nicole hasn’t felt the need for counseling. “If I had gone to Columbine for three or four years and actually knew a lot of these people,” she says, “it would have been worse.” (Her father, 35, who has lived in the area all his life, was hospitalized in May for ulcers and stress.)

Nicole has never considered leaving Columbine and sees little point in some of the school’s new security measures. “I’m sorry, but that’s dumb,” she says of the new ID tags. “It’s like being in a correctional facility for juveniles.”

REGRETS ARE NOT AN ACCEPTABLE OPTION

Sean Graves’s road to recovery has been a trying one. Still confined to a wheelchair—the bullets that tore through his stomach damaged nerves controlling movement in his legs and feet—he considers himself lucky to have made it to his family’s annual males-only camp-out near Denver on Aug. 7. “Before this, I would look at somebody in a wheelchair and feel sorry for them,” says Graves, 15, who doctors hope may be able to walk again with a crutch. “Now I feel like congratulating them for surviving in the first place.”

Days after returning from camping, Graves was back in the hospital for his fourth surgery since the shooting. His parents—Natalie, 38, a secretary, and Randy, 38, a computer security engineer—view their older son’s determination (brother Seth is 13) with awe. Once during physical therapy the pain was so

intense that Sean threw up. “He had an opportunity to bow out, but he said no,” says Natalie.

On May 3, Graves regained feeling in his left foot, and he is now able to move about for short periods with a walker. “In my head I look at it as a race,” he says. “I remember when they said, ‘So-and-so is doing this now,’ and I thought, ‘Well, if he’s going home, then I’m going home.’ ”

Home, meanwhile, is being renovated so that by the end of the month, when the Graveses return to their house near Littleton, it will be equipped with ramps to accommodate Sean’s wheelchair. Sean, who is scheduled to return to Columbine a week after the opening of school, plans to spend his free time working to regain strength and coordination. “If he doesn’t want to do something, it’s difficult to nudge him,” says Randy. “But if it’s something he’s interested in, he’s like a bulldog until he’s conquered it.”

IN PAIN, BUT AIDED BY FAITH

Mark Taylor is tired these days—tired of the media asking questions, tired of spending time in the hospital (50 days in all, over four separate stays) and, most of all, tired of the constant hurting. “I felt it when the bullets went in,” says Taylor, 16, who undergoes ultrasound therapy and takes up to eight pills a day to help ease the pain caused by eight wounds to his legs and torso. “I am still healing from my broken ribs and the bullets in my back. And my legs hurt.”

Taylor, a born-again Christian, was at a religious meeting with other students outside the school at the time of the attack, and he and his family are sustained by prayer still. His mother, Donna Taylor, 50, a trade-show coordinator who gave up her job to care for Mark at their rented house in an affluent section of

Jefferson County, says she took him out of a Christian school and sent him to Columbine High—in the hope that he would get attention for a reading disability—just four weeks before the shootings. ‘Now she is looking for another Christian school for her son, one of seven siblings aged 16 to 35. “I don’t feel comfortable in Columbine,” she says. “I didn’t feel peaceful when I put him in there.”

COMING TO TERMS WITH UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS

Hit by as many as eight bullets, Richard Castaldo, 17, suffered arm, kidney, lung and spleen injuries, as well as spinal-cord damage that has left him paralyzed from the waist down. The last of the students to be released from Craig, he leaves much of the talking to his mother, Connie Michalik. “I really don’t have much to say,” he explains with a shy smile. Mostly, Michalik explains, he has questions. “He says, ‘I don’t understand why they did this. What did I do to them? I didn’t even know them.’ ”

The hardest part for Richard, she says, has been coming to terms with the death of Rachel Scott, 17, with whom he’d been having lunch that day. After he was shot, he could hear his friend’s cries. “He’s cried about that a lot,” says Michalik. “He said, ‘I wish I could have helped her. I just couldn’t move.’ ”

A member of Columbine’s marching band, Richard has enjoyed the visits to Craig by Aerosmith and other musical acts. But the star he would most like to meet now is Marilyn Manson. “I think it would be kind of funny to talk to him, because the whole thing was blamed on him,” says Richard, referring to criticism of the rocker’s supposedly poisonous influence on the young. “I think that’s stupid. Censorship in general is stupid.”

A 400-square-foot suite, equipped with a roll-in shower and convenient voice-activated lights, has been added to accommodate his disability at the home he shares with his mother and stepfather, Craig Michalik. (His brother Michael, 15, lives with their father, Rick.) Perhaps more than ever, Richard cherishes his independence. “He gets really mad at me if I push his wheelchair,” says his mother. “He wants to do a lot of stuff by himself.”

Michalik, a substitute teacher, says her son has told her, “I think God wants me to do something, but I’m not quite sure what it is yet.” She adds, “He thinks it has to do with peace.” Last summer, says Michalik, she asked a friend to do Richard’s astrology chart. When the friend reported back that Richard’s life would have a “global effect,” Michalik thought she was crazy. Now she’s not so sure.

TAKING COMFORT IN HUGS AND GOOD WISHES

On May 30, Mark Kintgen and his identical twin brother, Michael, celebrated their 18th birthdays sitting with their parents, Kay and Dale, in VIP seats near the winner’s circle at the Indianapolis 500, courtesy of Denver race-car driver Buzz Calkins. For Mark, an avid Indy fan, that was a high point of a difficult summer as he recovered from two buckshot wounds to the left side of his head and neck. The lead shots missed hitting anything vital by fractions of an inch—a particular blessing since Mark’s right side is already weakened by cerebral palsy. “All I could think,” says Kay, “was, ‘Please, God, don’t take the use of his other hand away.’ ”

Released from the hospital within days, Mark was able to attend the funerals of two of his friends. He says it helped to receive a letter from the Klebolds. “I felt

like they were really sorry,” he says. “I’ve tried to forgive [the killers], and I think I kind of have. You have to get on with life.” When his mother admits, “I personally am glad those boys are gone,” Mark agrees. “Yeah,” he says, “at least we don’t have to go through a trial.”

The Kintgens, who drew strength from the letters of support they received, believe there has been a positive change in Columbine since the massacre. “I think we are a lot more tolerant of each other and not so quick to judge,” says Mark’s brother Michael of his Columbine schoolmates. Still, Kay admits she feels more protective of her boys. “I think the kids are getting a little tired of it, but I have to squeeze them every time they walk out that door,” she says. “You just hang on a little longer.”

Mark felt apprehensive the morning school opened but got over his butterflies when he saw friends at the rally. “All the chanting and singing was really uplifting,” he says, and once everyone was back in school “it was pretty much business as usual. It wasn’t that traumatic at all.”

AN EQUESTRIAN GETS BACK IN THE SADDLE, SLOWLY

Kacey Kuegsegger has written more than 1,200 thank-you notes to well-wishers who contacted her as she recovered from wounds to her right shoulder and thumb earlier this year. But no gesture meant more to her than the gift of a poster-size photo of her beloved quarter horse Big Daddy Crain. Kuegsegger, 17, who ranked high in several state quarter horse competitions, had been training hard to compete in this summer’s World Show in Fort Worth. “I was working on being a world-class rider,” she says.

After months of physical therapy, which still continues, Ruegsegger is riding again, although the most demanding training—and rigorous competition—is now probably out of the question, KJUC serious ian UJUIU permanently damage joints that were painstakingly reconstructed during three separate operations. “She will never have the whole range of motion in her shoulder,” says her mother, homemaker Darcey Ruegsegger, 46, “so she has to compensate.”

Like the other victims, Ruegsegger has had to make lots of adjustments in the last few months. Still traumatized by the shooting, she prefers not to be left alone, suffers from nightmares and is plagued with worry about the safety of her siblings Brian, 21, a senior at the University of Kentucky, Britney, 14, and Brett, 12. “There are a lot of nuts around,” explains her father, attorney Greg Ruegsegger, 46. “After all, Kacey was in a school library and got shot.”

Ruegsegger has decided to spend her senior year at a small private school in Denver instead of returning to Columbine High. It’s not just the memories of last April 20, she says, but also of the preceding school year, during which two of her friends from another high school committed suicide and two others, including her horse trainer, died from the effects of leukemia. “I’m just looking forward to being out of high school,” she says.

Jill Smolowe and Patrick Rogers

Vickie Bane in Jefferson County