

Columbine shooter's mother shares her experience

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Sue Klebold, mother of Columbine High School shooter Dylan Klebold, shares her struggles in the aftermath of the tragedy during a Virginia Festival of the Book event.

Sue Klebold has been asked the same question, over and over, for nearly 18 years: “How could you not know?”

It’s a question she’s been asking herself, too, over and over, since April 20, 1999 — the day her son Dylan carried out the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history.

For longer than her youngest son was alive, Klebold has lived with the “devastating grief and humiliation” of being tied to the Columbine High School massacre, the Colorado shooting that took the lives of 12 students, one teacher and perpetrators Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. Their actions on that day opened national dialogues on gun control, bullying and mental illness, but for Sue Klebold, the horrors of that day have reshaped her very existence.

While she continues to come to grips with grief, Klebold has molded her new reality into becoming a voice for the advancement of mental health awareness and advocacy. That voice manifested itself in her memoir, “A Mother’s Reckoning,” published last year. On Sunday afternoon, Klebold took the stage of the University of Virginia’s Culbreth Theatre for a sold-out presentation as part of the Virginia Festival of the Book.

“It’s sometimes hard to know where to begin when I speak with people,” Klebold started, saying that since she started talking publicly about her experiences, she’s been keenly aware that someone in any audience may have lost someone because of what Dylan did.

“I’m sorry if my son has caused you pain,” Klebold told Sunday’s crowd. “If there’s anyone in here, forgive me, please, for raising someone who would do something so terrible.”

Like many others, Klebold also wonders whether there were signs that she’d missed that may have foretold her son’s actions. According to his mother, Dylan Klebold had been a gifted young man, and “the kind of kid who makes you feel like you’re being a good parent,” she said. While his grades began to slack in high school, Dylan had

friends, did production for school plays and had an adept interest in computers. The weekend before the shooting, he'd gone to prom with a classmate, traveling there in a limo with a group of friends.

"You can imagine my disconnect," Klebold said Sunday.

In the months following the shooting, Klebold still clung to the idea that her son's involvement might have been some sort of mistake. After all, he'd been involved in theater as a sound technician for a school play — might this be some sort of prank? Perhaps it started as a performance, or maybe someone had given him a prop gun and things got out of control, she recalls considering.

It wasn't until six months later, when she was able to read a police report of the incident, that Klebold was able to accept what had happened.

While she acknowledges that some people find it offensive to say, Klebold still views her son's death as a suicide. She's knows of and understands some people's opposition to that stance, wanting only to label him as a murderer and not one of the victims on that deadly day. But in the months after it happened, Klebold found notes stuffed in her son's notebook that indicated that he was "in agony." Dylan wouldn't have co-created his horrendous plan had he not

Klebold understands now that underlying all of her son's agony was undiagnosed mental illness. Since the shooting, that illness has compounded, and continues to compound, in so many lives and families affected Dylan's actions. The tragedy has had a resounding emotional toll on the school's teachers and students, on the first responders to the scene, on the Columbine community at large and so many others; it's a pain that doesn't go away, she said.

"It's not just the [one] day; it's the ripples," Klebold said.

For years, Klebold dealt with the pain and humiliation as best she could while suffering from newfound bouts of depression and panic attacks. Slowly, she has felt herself shifting from a victim to a survivor as she undertakes mental health advocacy work.

Still, there is “always a piece of me that blames myself,” she said. If she could go back and change things, Klebold said that first and foremost, she would try to make “an environment where he could talk, and I would just listen.” Had she been a better listener, she believes Dylan would have been willing to share his internal strife, rather than bottle it up as he did.

“As parents, we believe it is our job to help our kids feel better,” Klebold said. “I think our more important job is to just help them feel.”

But, of course, things don’t happen “in a vacuum,” she said. Dylan had direct interactions with the criminal justice system, the school system and the health care system before the shooting, none of which seemed able to detect what he was planning. Therein lies room for improvement, so long as those systems are willing to take mental health care reform more seriously, she said.

Klebold’s own experiences do not exist in a vacuum either. Sitting in the front row for her presentation was state Sen. R. Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, who suffered his own family tragedy in 2013 when his mentally ill son, Austin “Gus” Deeds, stabbed his father multiple times before taking his own life.

“It’s incredibly difficult to try and make sense out of the senseless,” Deeds said. “What she can talk about is our negligence with respect to the way we care for mental illness and those who have it, and our failure in the past to address that.”

Deeds, an outspoken proponent of reforming the state’s mental health care system, said mental illness often gets short shrift compared with other medical maladies, despite the fact that mental illness affects “nearly every family in some respect.”

“More than 50 percent of people with problems go more than 10 years from the onset of those problems until they get treatment, and that’s unacceptable,” Deeds said. “We have to reduce the stigma and we also have to invest, as a nation and a state, in care for the mentally ill.”