

A Shared Grief

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Capt. Vince DiManna has a been-there face. He's 26 years a Denver police officer, a veteran of the SWAT team. His is the hard, angular, seen-it-all face of a cop.

This week, though, it's been letting him down. He'll stop talking for a second and his eyes will lose focus. The taut tension of the cop face will quiver.

He's thinking about Rachel.

Nick Baumgart has a show-me face. He's just 17, a high school senior, with adolescent acne and eyes full of promise. He likes acting and cooking and his is an eager face, a what-will-the-world-unfurl-for-me-today face.

This week, though, pain haunts it. He tugs at his lower lip a lot and he does a lot of hard swallowing. His eyes are dry but red. He hurts.

He, too, is thinking of Rachel.

Capt. DiManna and Nick Baumgart--just two of the thousands forever changed by the massacre at Columbine High. They don't know one another. And as they grope toward healing, they're drawing very different lessons from the tragedy, the one dwelling on questions and anger, the other finding hope and promise in the horror. Yet the two of them--the tough, tanned cop and the pale, polite kid--are bound together. Bound by a single face, which captures for both the devastation at Columbine High.

That face is Rachel's.

Rachel Scott--an actress, a musician, a poet, a kid--was 17 when she was shot dead Tuesday.

Nick had taken her to the prom the Saturday before.

Capt. DiManna discovered her body.

Both Nick and DiManna lived through enough terror for a lifetime Tuesday. Nick, in physics when the shooting erupted, raced from corridor to corridor with his classmates and teacher in a wild dash for safety. Each time they turned a corner, they would see flashes, hear gunfire, pull up, whirl around, try another route. DiManna arrived within minutes of the first 911 call--and a chunk of shrapnel gouged into his cheek when the killers tossed a bomb his way. He spent hours rescuing hostages and hunting the gunmen, all the while praying about one student in particular, a student he sought but could not find: his youngest son, Jeff, a Columbine senior.

Those ordeals will no doubt surface again and again in the weeks to come as the teen and the cop come to grips with what happened. But the flashbacks racking them now--the first to erode the numbness that got them through the first few days--are not of shotguns, trench coats or danger. They're of Rachel.

Nick sees her as she was last Saturday night, the only girl at the prom in a sleek black dress. (Everyone else wore poofy pastels.) He tugs at that lower lip. He sees her in the limo, talking the crazy talk that made her so fun. She had a good time pondering, he remembers now, if elephants have toes. Nick swallows, tugs the lip, smiles so bravely you want to drop everything and hug him. He sees Rachel in the restaurant, the only one in his group who dared sample the pate. He looks at a photo of her, so pretty, so bright, sees her laughing as she struggled to pin on his boutonniere.

DiManna never knew that Rachel. By the time he saw her, she was dead. That's the way he sees her now, when his eyes lose focus and he stares into

nothing. So frail. So light. A little girl, that's what she was. A little girl, dead, on the schoolyard lawn.

Taking Their Grief in Different Directions

From those contrasting images of Rachel, the commander and the student have taken their grief in opposite directions.

DiManna sees Rachel dead, and he's angry. "We can't win back the innocence those students lost."

Nick sees Rachel alive, and he's hopeful. "She's certainly not gone. She's going to be a part of us."

Nick and his friends have spent hours remembering Rachel. Joking about how she used to imitate the spitting dinosaur from "Jurassic Park". Laughing at how she would take any dare you could throw at her. They've decided to finish the play she was writing and produce it next year at Columbine. They hope, too, to publish her notebook of poems. As a tribute to Rachel, Nick's even considering a career in acting. He's always wanted to be a chef, but he met Rachel through the drama club, and somehow sticking with acting just feels like a good way to honor her.

"In a lot of ways, she's going to keep living," Nick promises, sure in this case it's not a cliché.

Surrounded by friends from his church youth group, Nick broke down and sobbed Tuesday night when a classmate told him she had seen Rachel dead in the schoolyard. Since then, though, he has tried so hard to convert his hurt into hope. Unlike many of his friends, he even wants to go back to school--not back to Columbine, but back somewhere--to finish out the last 19 days of his senior year. He thinks that will give him closure.

His mom, Bonnie, worries he's being too much of a trouper. "There's a lot buried in there," she says.

If so, Nick won't let it out.

He won't even let himself rage at the gunmen. Perhaps because he used to be friends with them--he spent most of a summer in a treehouse with Eric Davis Harris, and in elementary school he played with Dylan Bennet Klebold--Nick can't see them as evil. He can't. Dylan, he says, was a smart, shy kid who latched on to strong personalities and followed. And Eric? Nick stopped hanging out with him in eighth grade when Eric became obsessed with violent video games. The way Nick figures it, Eric snapped. "Just lost touch with reality."

Holding on always to that image of Rachel in her black prom dress, Nick has decided it's not constructive to be mad. Or to weep or feel scared or even ask why. Rachel, he says, "would absolutely kick our butts if she saw us making such a big deal over her."

So he's trying to heal through positive thinking. He's concentrating now on all the good that has come from the Columbine killings.

His Exhibit A: Students have bonded.

The meanest boy Nick has ever known--a guy who trips people and laughs, who teases kids till they cry--spent the hours of the shooting helping others. He boosted girls over a chain-link fence to safety. He compiled lists of everyone who had made it out. He was nice. He cared. Nick is sure the transformation will last. He's just as sure that the cliques that distanced jock from prep from nerd at Columbine won't reemerge when school reopens. Not for years.

"When you're running through the halls fearing for your lives, it doesn't matter who's a cheerleader and who's Johnny football star," he explains. "That's all so petty. I don't think anyone in the school could go back to it now."

Nick's Exhibit B: The community has bonded.

Littleton looks like so many affluent, anonymous suburbs. Strip mall after strip mall. Tidy lawn after tidy lawn. McDonald's and the Gap and Mailboxes Etc. and neighbors who don't know neighbors. But strangers wiped away one another's tears out there by Columbine High this week. Business owners came forward by the dozens to donate food, money, flowers, even building supplies to fix up the school. Everyone's been hugging everyone this week. Hugging and meaning it too.

Nick believes--he has to believe--this loving will last.

"It's restored a lot of my faith in people," he says. "It's ironic, that something like this could do that."

So far, there is no Exhibit C. But Nick's working on it.

DiManna Agonized Over Son's Status

DiManna can't match that youthful optimism.

He's 47 and he's been a cop more than half his life. He's seen a lot of death. He's been in danger often.

Columbine, though, was different. It's hit him harder than anything ever has. "A huge, giant impact," he calls it. "A blunt smack to every part of your body."

DiManna, remember, has a son at Columbine. The youngest of his three boys. Jeff. He was driving home from shopping with his wife when his radio crackled with news that a gunman was rampaging through Columbine High. Racing to the high school, he thought of Jeff. And he didn't stop thinking--and

praying, and hoping, and praying some more--for 90 agonizing minutes, until he got word from his wife that Jeff was OK.

Every corner he turned inside that school, DiManna thought he might find Jeff. Every time his walkie-talkie sputtered with warnings--more students shot, more bombs exploding--he prayed that Jeff had escaped. He was directing his troops, doing his job, but all the time he was praying: "Maybe he got out. Maybe he got out."

Just listening to DiManna tell his story makes your pulse race, quick and nervous. He was one of the first officers on the scene. Arrived by 11:35, he says. As a SWAT commander, he made the call: He sent five men into the school to start a room-by-room hunt for gunmen and hostages. The other four went with him around the yard to rescue two students he saw lying in the grass.

One, a boy, was alive. His eyes fluttered. He moved his hand. DiManna held a shield out to deflect any bullets while Lt. Pat Phelan crept up behind him, grabbed the boy by the ankles and dragged him to a medical helicopter. Neither officer knows what became of him next.

The other student in the yard was dead. They had passed her on the way to the boy, and they knew her bullet wounds were fatal. But they didn't want to believe it. They went back to get her, under fire. That's when a chunk of shrapnel lodged in DiManna's right cheek.

"We couldn't leave that little girl there. We were hoping maybe we were wrong. We weren't doctors. Maybe there was something they could do."

The little girl was Rachel.

Thinking of Rachel, of that awful, awful day, DiManna gets angry all over again. It's not just Rachel. He's angry that Jeff had to crouch under a counter as the gunmen approached laughing, running and spraying bullets before

finally sneaking out a side door. He's angry, too, for Jeff's girlfriend, who's in the hospital, shot at least three times in the arm. And for all the hundreds of students he found hiding in every cranny of the school: in broom closets, under desks, on shelves, even in the cafeteria's walk-in freezer.

This is the stage he's arrived at now. It's anger and it's questioning. "This happened there," he says. "Why?" Then repeats it: "Why?"

Part of DiManna's pent-up frustration stems from the criticism dumped on police.

Word went around early on that SWAT teams waited for hours before entering the school. That's just not true. Yes, some students had to wait hours for rescue, even though they were calling 911 on cell phones, screaming and begging for help. Yes, Coach William "Dave" Sanders may have bled to death. But officers couldn't rush blindly to his side. They had to be methodical, to sweep the school room-by-room.

DiManna has thought it all through since then, and he's proud of the police response. They had no way of knowing the gunmen were dead in the library. All sorts of wild rumors were scooting across their radios: The gunmen were on the roof. They had planted bombs in backpacks. They had switched clothes with other students.

Given the chaos, DiManna is convinced his team did right.

But that doesn't make the awful ache of Tuesday any easier to bear.

"With the terror and the devastation and the horror that went on--that those monsters created--I don't ever want to set foot in that school again," he says. He doesn't think students should have to, either. "You can repaint. You can recarpet. You can do anything you want. But their friends died there. They damn near died there."

Funeral for a Golden Girl

Today is Rachel's funeral.

She will be remembered by her parents, her younger brother and her many, many friends as a girl who found much joy in life--and who spread much joy around her.

She wanted to be a Broadway actress. And a poet too. She was beautiful, and she was fun. She sparkled.

Her image keeps coming back to Nick Baumgart and to Vince DiManna as they struggle to regain their balance in a world slammed topsy-turvy by two angry outcasts at Columbine High last Tuesday. Nick tugs his lip. Capt. DiManna stares at nothing. They're seeing Rachel. She's reminding them, yes, of an awful day past. But she's also tugging them forward.

The other night, DiManna went out to dinner with Jeff and they talked about their terrors and their losses. "It felt like a lot of weight was lifted off my chest," DiManna said. "We're never going to be 100%, but we will get close to normalcy."

The other afternoon, Nick and his friends got together again to reminisce about good times with Rachel. "We spent 2 1/2 hours without a pause and we weren't even close to done," Nick recalled, smiling.

"I'm doing OK," he said, and rubbed his lip. "I'm OK."