

Teens beat fears, return to teach



Students at Columbine 10 years ago, now teachers at the school. From left: Brett O'Neill, Katie Tennessen, Cris Welsh, Alise Steiner and Mandy Bowen Cooke

KEVIN SIMPSON

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Most staffers working at Columbine High School on the day of the 1999 shootings have left, but five students felt drawn back to the school — as teachers.

Alise Steiner was a sophomore about to take a math test when the fire alarms went off. Today, she teaches math and coaches girls lacrosse and cross country.

“It’s like all the roads aligned,” she says, “and I ended up back at Columbine.”

Even when she got a job offer last year from a private Christian school, her attachment overcame the temptation to move.

“I was thinking hard — I was so torn,” Steiner says. “But I could not leave. I feel this is where I’m at, and it’s meant to be.”

Cris Welsh also was a sophomore in math class when the violence erupted. He returned for his junior year. He calls it the hardest year of his life because a succession of suicides and an unsolved murder further plagued the community.

“By the time I was a senior, I couldn’t wait to be done with it all,” Welsh recalls. “But when I went away to college and started considering a career in education, I started thinking about what the school had meant to me. I figured if I became a teacher, there was no better place to spend my career than Columbine.”

He came back as a student teacher in 2005. Now he teaches social studies.

Mandy Bowen Cooke, a third student in math class that day in 1999, imagined herself as a teacher from an early age.

“I don’t know if I could say I absolutely wanted to be back at Columbine,” Bowen Cooke says, “but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It was always a positive place to be, and I knew I could make an impact here.”

Katie Tennessen spent almost five hours barricaded in the choir office after the shooting began. At graduation, principal Frank DeAngelis joked that he wouldn’t retire until she came back to teach at Columbine.

Two years ago, she returned to teach social studies.

“It’s just the comfort of knowing this is the place I’d gone to every day for so many years,” Tennessen says. “It’s a place that you have a connection to above and beyond. I think of all the time spent doing after-school stuff, cheerleading, student senate — all the time you put into this place.”

Brett O’Neill was a half-mile away from the school when the shooting started, having lunch. As a senior, he never attended another class at Columbine.

After college, his local connection gave him a leg up on his first teaching job at nearby Ken Caryl Middle School. This year, he became the instrumental music director at Columbine.

“I remember being a sophomore in high school,” O’Neill says, “and deciding that I wanted to teach and thinking one day I’d come back. Sure enough, I came back. It’s where I feel most comfortable.”