

Columbine Students Talk of the Disaster and Life

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LITTLETON, Colo. -- Before the gunshots rang out during fifth period at Columbine High School on April 20, students there were busy with the everyday life of American teen-agers. Now, after a massacre that took 15 lives, including those of the two classmates who were the gunmen, the students wonder where they and their school go from here.

Across the country, the mass shooting again raised questions about teen-agers and the often violent popular culture they are immersed in. What did the assault say about growing up today, the pressures of high school, the fragility of teen-age identity? Did it say anything at all?

In an effort to find answers, The New York Times invited eight Columbine students -- four young women and four young men -- to talk about the violence in their school and how it has changed the way they look at the world.

The 8 Who Shared Feelings and Opinions

- **DEVON ADAMS**, 16, sophomore, a member of debate team who is active in drama. Plans to go to college in Colorado. A friend of Dylan Klebold who also knew Eric Harris. Was on the opposite side of Columbine High School when the shootings began and quickly fled the building.

- **JESSICA CAVE**, 16, sophomore, an aspiring model who belongs to a Christian church group. Hopes to go to college. Did not know either gunman but her brother had worked with Mr. Harris. Was locked in a storage closet for more than three hours during the shootings before a SWAT team rescued her.

- **RICHARD COLBERT**, 16, sophomore, played football last year, plays guitar in a Christian music group. Hopes to enter military service. Knew Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold as acquaintances through other friends. Was in the school auditorium for 30 minutes until a janitor led him and others out through the cafeteria.

- **ANDREW FRASER**, 17, junior, member of concert choir and a male comedy singing group. Plans to attend college. Knew of both Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold. Was in the choir classroom and ran outside immediately without seeing the shootings.

- **MEG HAINS**, 17, junior, member of Family Community Career Leaders of America and is thinking of going out for baseball next year. Hopes to study acting in college. Knew both gunmen through friends in the trench coat mafia. Ran outside the school thinking there was a fire drill and found her way blocked by a fence she could not climb.

- **NICK JACKSON**, 18, senior, varsity wrestler. Plans to attend college and become a firefighter. Did not know either gunman. He and Dustin Thurman had just left for lunch off campus when the shooting began. His brother, Anthony, a freshman, also attended the discussion.

- **JENI LaPLANTE**, 18, senior, member of Distributive Education Clubs of America. Plans to attend college. Had a bowling class with the two gunmen and other classes over the years with Mr. Harris. Was off campus for lunch during the shooting.

- **DUSTIN THURMAN**, 18, senior, varsity wrestler, played football first two years. Plans to study computer science in college. Had bowling class with the gunmen. Was off campus for lunch when the shooting started but tried to get back into the school to find his sister, who survived after being in the cafeteria.

Their nearly two-hour discussion touched on cliques, guns, race, music, video games and fashion -- and the nightmares that now keep some of them from sleeping. The main themes have been distilled from a transcript for this article.

QUESTION Tell us about the trench coat mafia.

DEVON Last year the trench coat mafia consisted of 15 to 20 people. They were a group of kids who maybe played Magic, that card game, and went out and smoked together. That's all it was. And, yes, they happened to wear black trench coats. They called themselves the trench coat mafia.

It fell apart because half those people graduated last year. You hear all this talk, about the trench coat mafia, whatever -- Dylan and Eric weren't even a part of that, first off. I just want everybody to know the trench coat mafia is just another name, just another way to place blame. Because those people who were in the trench coat mafia or whatever, aren't even part of it anymore.

Q. We've heard a lot about social cliques in Columbine. How powerful are they?

DEVON I don't think the cliques were really that intense. Lots and lots of people knew people from both groups. A lot of people are from both sides of the gun. I mean, they were friends with the trench coat mafia and then they were friends with the, you know, the jocks or whatever you want to call them.

JENI I don't think it was really cliques. It's more like groups of friends. I was talking a couple months back with the class president, Heather, and we were saying how much it's changed since eighth grade, where you had the distinct groups. Once you're a senior, you know, everyone is just -- we thought everyone was friends.

I guess we weren't, but -- It was more like groups of friends, not, you know, we don't talk to them and we're going to raise our noses at them.

NICK I think our school is such a great place. If you played a sport, or whatever you did, it was such a great place to go. And I don't think we should be remembered for what happened that day, but for how great we were. I want my brother to go to school there, wrestle there, and graduate from Columbine. It's just such a great school that it can't end in such a tragedy.

Q. How do sports affect social groupings?

NICK It wasn't like just the jocks hung out with the jocks, to me. I hung out with everybody. And I wasn't mean to people who didn't play a sport. I didn't think any less of somebody who didn't.

Q. Did some athletes?

NICK Yeah, there were some.

JENI It was a lot worse last year.

Q. In what ways?

JENI Just with big jocks picking on little jocks, or big jocks picking on, you know, skaters.

Q. Who are you talking about? What groups?

DUSTIN Football players, mostly.

Q. Nick, you're a wrestler. What's it like to be an athlete at Columbine?

NICK On the day before a meet, we wear our warm-ups, and we wear them with pride. It just feels so good to walk around knowing that you're wearing a warm-up that says Columbine Rebels. It's just the impact of being a part of the school in whatever you do. It's a great thing.

DUSTIN I think you've got maybe a little more respect if you played sports, or people look at you differently.

Q. How do people treat athletes?

DUSTIN You don't ever get bad looks or anything.

ANDREW I think the other reason that they're sometimes treated with more respect is because there's a whole lot of school spirit at Columbine. People really stand up for their teams, and the athletes are the ones that actually perform the tasks and, you know, give the school some of its pride. They're the ones that give the school a sense of accomplishment.

DEVON I'm on the Columbine Forensics Team, speech and debate. We have some people who play football on our team, some people who are cheerleaders. But we have a problem with the athletes sometimes. At the prom assembly, when our national qualifiers went up and our state champion went up, there was booing. And I looked over and they were wearing football shirts.

It's really sad that that happens because I respect people who wrestle and play football, because I could never even do that.

It's so sad that academics are so low on our ranking, because it's something else to be proud of.

There needs to be school spirit for everything.

DUSTIN I just had a question. What are considered jocks? Because there are so many sports in our school.

NICK I think every time I hear somebody call somebody a jock, I think it's the same as them calling me, like, an [expletive] or something like that. Because every time somebody calls somebody a jock it's in that kind of tone. You know, it's like, hey jock.

MEG Jock is a kind of slang down term, like some people will call other people freaks because their hair is different.

Q. Where did Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold fit in?

DEVON Dylan Klebold was one of my best friends. And when I hung out with him, there was just something that happened. I mean, whether they were wearing jeans and a T-shirt, or whether they were wearing their black trench coats, people would give them looks. Just like, "You don't belong here, would you leave?"

Let's block out last week when I say this -- they hadn't done anything physically wrong to people. I mean, they dressed different. So? They wore black. So what? It's just, they were hated and so they felt they hated back. They hated back.

MEG They'd call them freaks, weirdos, faggots. It was just stupid name calling, acting like little children. It's like my cousins come home, they're only 2 and 3, and they come home and start calling me names, calling each other names like butt-head and all these other things. They probably couldn't handle it.

DEVON People called them fags. People thought they were gay. And that's not right. I mean, even if they were -- and which, they're not -- it's not right to say that.

DUSTIN When they call them fag, I think it's a slang term for, like, loser. I don't think they really meant that. They were like nerds.

ANDREW I believe these guys could have been taunted pretty easily, because there are many different people in our school that do this. But I want to speak not as a jock or an athlete, but for them, in saying that these are not the only type of people who should be targeted. It's just natural at any high school that you're going to have different cliques.

I can see how these guys could have easily caught a lot of, not always physical abuse, but just verbal -- someone happening to walk by in the hall and saying, "Hey buddy, nice lipstick," just small things that I think really built up over time. But it wasn't just one group or person in particular.

MEG I have a friend, he doesn't dress like everybody else. He wears heavy metal band T-shirts, black shorts no matter what the weather, and a black hat, and he has long hair. And friends who normally just come up to me and talk to me and are so nice to me -- when I'm around him, they give me looks. And people come up to me after I talk to him, they're like, "How can you talk to him? How can you even acknowledge his presence?" I'm like, "It's simple, he's nice."

That was the same with Eric and Dylan. I knew both of them. I went bowling with them occasionally. And they were extremely nice. They never showed any signs that they'd like to go off and hurt people.

NICK I don't think there's a lot of stereotyping. If I saw Eric walk by, I'd ignore him, I wouldn't go talk to him, because what would we talk about? We have no interests that are the same. I don't think he wants to go in the wrestling room and practice with me.

DUSTIN Everyone says we stereotype them. But I think they stereotype themselves, too. Because I had both in class with me, and they would not talk to anyone. They acted like they had no spirit at all.

Q. Adults are concerned about violent computer games and song lyrics. Is this a large part of teen-age life today?

MEG I've played the game Doom that they're saying Dylan and Eric constantly played. And I don't think it was that game. I'd go to school and there were people that would so royally piss me off, and I'd just go home and I'd sit on that game for hours, just taking out my stress on it. And the next day I'd be perfectly fine.

That's the way I get rid of my stress, instead of going out and really killing people. It saves a lot of time. I know this sounds weird, but some violent games are a therapy for kids.

JESSICA I think that works for some people. But for someone who gets teased and ridiculed and gets angry every day at people and then actually has things going through their mind like that -- I think Marilyn Manson and games like that do influence them. I think it builds up even more.

And they wore black. I'm not saying that's bad, or stupid, I'm just saying that it is a very depressing color that they wore every day. And that sort of reflects on their attitudes toward things.

Q. What's the appeal of Marilyn Manson?

NICK Insane. Drugs.

JESSICA Insanity, yeah. Crazy. Insanity.

DEVON O.K., they listened to Marilyn Manson, but not like some people. They listened to him every once in a while. They listened to Nine Inch Nails. They listened to Rammstein.

They listened to Rammstein and Nine Inch Nails and KMFDM because of the beats. Because Dylan wanted to be a drummer. He didn't even know what they were saying in Rammstein. He doesn't speak German. He just liked the beat of the song. The same with Dr. Octagon, D.J. Spooky, all those techno bands. They've got these beats to them.

JESSICA They may have listened to them for the beats, but after someone listens to that crap over and over and over for the beats, they do hear the lyrics and it is in their subconscious.

Q. What do the guys here think?

DUSTIN I have most of those CD's that they're talking about. It doesn't bother me.

Q. Why do you like them?

DUSTIN I don't really agree with the words that they're saying. But when I'm listening to it I can turn it up real loud and get out aggression while I'm, like, driving. And, I like the beats, like you said. But it's not making me psycho listening.

RICHARD Everybody takes it differently, and you can make it into things that it's not. Like people blame music and video games and all these outside influences as scapegoats. And all the people on, like, "Dateline" that are doing this, they're like 50 years old. They don't know that stuff. They don't know what we're talking about.

Q. How do young people view guns?

MEG I am utterly afraid of guns. When I heard somebody had a gun, I was fine, but then I had to jump over the pit fence and I couldn't make it. My arms just went totally wobbly. And then I found out he was shooting people. I broke down into tears, a mass of tears. I couldn't find my best friend. And this was all over guns.

DUSTIN I have all my guns in my room in a case. I have bullets and everything.

Q. How many guns do you have?

DUSTIN How many? Probably six or seven. I could run around and start shooting people easily. But it's morals. You just know right from wrong. My parents have trained me with guns and everything and my sister.

Q. Does anyone else have guns in the house?

ANDREW We have guns at our house. A lot of times it's owned by the parents for protection. But I have a lot of friends who, like Dustin said, have literally an arsenal of shotguns and high-powered rifles at their house. But he's right, it is about morals and when they are used. About self-control.

Q. All of these shootings have occurred at white middle-class schools. What do you make of that?

ANDREW Nothing in particular. Columbine is definitely white. I would say of the around 2,000 kids, there are at most 200 black kids. I'm not sure if I'm right on that.

GENERAL COMMENTS Not that many. I think there's 20. I think there's like 6.

ANDREW But there was a lot of speculation when it first went off that it was actually black students that came into the school and that were shooting everyone else. Right immediately after

everyone had run out of the building and were saying, "What the heck are we running from?" people were saying, "I don't know, I just saw some black guy in a trench coat shooting people."

I don't know why people were making the assumption that they were black. But, otherwise at Columbine there is generally not much prejudice or racism.

MEG I am black/white mixed. And when the media is coming up with this thing that Dylan and Eric were racist, they weren't. They were my friends. They were very nice to me, both of them. I don't get this whole racial thing that people are coming up with.

DEVON Dylan and Eric did use racial slurs. Because, unfortunately, it's becoming common. And what I have heard is they did call Isaiah an N before they shot him. I don't think it meant that they were racist. I think that they were just using the word that they -- unfortunately it's true that it has bearing from the movies and TV -- that they had learned is O.K.

Q. What about the Nazi stuff?

MEG That is the biggest load of [expletive] I've ever heard. They never wore swastikas around their arm. Never. Not in this entire year that I've known them. No.

DEVON They're not Nazis. They didn't worship Nazis. Some kid said, "Oh I saw them reading a book on Nazis." They read books on Nazis because, guess what they were learning about in World History? They were learning about the Nazis.

DUSTIN Everyone said that they saluted to Hitler after a strike in bowling and stuff. That wasn't true. If they got a strike, they would just sit down.

Q. The police said Eric's diary was full of Nazi references.

DEVON If Dylan and Eric were like neo-Nazis or whatever, then they kept it secret. They didn't proclaim it. And I don't think Dylan was.

NICK I don't think that it was a big racial thing. I mean, you see who they shot at.

Q. Is this going to happen in another high school?

JESSICA I think that it could happen anywhere. But I think it will happen more. Because, you know, these guys had the courage to do it and so I think there will be followers who will try it, too, or copycats or whatever. And I am like Rich, I am scared to death to go to school.

ANDREW I feel that I'm obligated to go back. I can see for other people who actually had to witness others die, it's understandable that that's probably way too traumatic for them to go back. I can understand that. But I feel like if they were to split up Columbine, or build a new school, then Dylan and Eric would have essentially accomplished their task in breaking up the school.

I think it's going to be tough the first week, or even month, to walk through the halls without remembering what went on. But I think that this school is strong enough and that it's going to be 10 times as good if kids actually stick together.

NICK I agree. I want my brother to go back. And I want the students to go back and still compete in whatever they're doing. Because if we don't, then it's going to make me feel like they won. But, it's much greater than that. There's so much love in that school.

Q.How well are you dealing with this?

MEG I was in a drawing class. I saw my friend Lance. He was shot. My teacher would constantly tell him to sit down, sit down, Lance. He was always standing up, walking around talking to everybody.

On Tuesday night I got maybe an hour of sleep, but I had a dream. I was walking into my drawing class and there was Lance. It was just me, Lance and the teacher. And the teacher tells him, "Go sit down, Lance." And he goes over to his desk, sits down, and blows up. And then I see Dylan and Eric laughing.

I have never had a worse dream. It's been recurring for the past week. And I just can't get rid of it. Because I've known Lance since middle school. And I've also known Dylan and Eric all year. I'm literally torn between them.

Q. Is anyone else having nightmares?

JESSICA I haven't had nightmares, but I've hardly been able to sleep in my room. It's in the basement. I've had to sleep on the couch in the living room because I can't go down there at night.

DUSTIN I usually just hang out with my friends. We stay up until we pretty much pass out.

Q. Did you do that before?

DUSTIN No, that's how I do it now. We just hang out until we pretty much cannot stay awake any longer.

Q. Is there anything else you want to say?

ANDREW As many times as I've heard it from parents, or counselors, or whoever else, I've never realized as strong as I have now that material possessions really don't mean anything to me anymore. That really the most important thing that you can have in the world is family and friends.

RICHARD I'm just proud to see the community pull together this spiritually. If we could just stay that way, this will never happen again.

DEVON I have one more thing to add. Just three simple words, and we've heard it a lot and it's true. We are Columbine!

NICK We will always be Columbine.

DEVON Columbine forever.