

Reader: Coping With Columbine Is a Continuing Journey

WESTWORD

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Twenty years ago, on April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School students killed twelve students and a teacher in a quiet, affluent southwest suburb of Denver. Although there have been other school shootings since then, notably in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, "Columbine" is a word that still rings across the country.

And the damage here still goes deep, as Alan Prendergast reported in "Columbine Survivors Talk About the Wounds that Won't Heal."

Back in 1999, school and local health officials had little notion of what sort of hurdles the survivors of such an unprecedented event might face, and few resources were available beyond the teams of grief counselors who were summoned in the immediate wake of the shootings. That has changed since Columbine, Prendergast reported.

Responses to his story came in from across the country. And while some readers say they're already tired of reading about Columbine on the eve of this grim anniversary, others applaud the continued discussion.

Gail Tracy responded from Denver:

I rarely ever read *Westword*, but felt compelled to read this article and was deeply moved I was a teacher in a rural school at the time of the Columbine shootings. Little did we know then that there would be more shootings. You really got across how deeply damaging this event was for those involved. I applaud the bravery of those who have had to continually face the horror of what happened.

Thank you for writing this article. So many people never think about what happens (even decades later) to the survivors.

Debra Wanamaker of Broward County Schools wrote from Parkland, Florida:

Thank you. I have connected with this article almost in every way. No other words are necessary other than I read this a year, a month and six days after Parkland, so unfortunately needed and helpful. Here's to hoping in twenty years things have changed and school shootings and the trauma related are only memories, not current events.

Betty Fitzpatrick also weighed in from Florida:

I lived in Colorado for thirty years, am a former nurse practitioner and was the director of Health Services for Jefferson County Schools in charge of crisis response, which included support during and after the Columbine shootings.

First, let me say thank you for lifting up the stories of the lasting effects of trauma on victims and survivors. It was a very thoughtful and provocative story and stayed with me as I awoke this morning. Twenty years later, I am still profoundly connected to all their stories. Coincidentally, I live about one hour away from where the Parkland shootings took place, and was reminded this weekend, again, of the effects of these events, as two students from there took their own lives in this past week. You really sorted through complicated issues and reminded me of so many things: how complicated trauma is, how recovery is an ongoing journey, how continued support is important and how we learn from others, and how continued research on how to best serve communities effected is so important. I actually met with the superintendent of schools in Broward County last June, just to offer support and guidance. My heart goes out to him and all that he and his community face.

I am impressed at how many Columbine survivors are finding their way, twenty years later, and what a positive impact they continue to have. I remember being frustrated

with the disconnect of services offered but not reaching the needs of those affected. I also went back to NYC immediately after 9/11 with the American Red Cross Mental Health Disaster Team and assisted there for three weeks, and witnessed again the shortcomings we have as a society when it comes to what is truly necessary to help in the process of grieving and healing.

Once again, thank you for elevating this need but also reminding us that this is a continuing journey...and we should never lose sight of it and always strive to do better!

Reta Wallis, a researcher at Utah State University, has interviewed several Columbine survivors as part of her graduate work into the long-term effects of PTSD. “People still aren’t being taken care of psychologically. In some cases, their physical health is suffering,” she says.

Through her research, Wallis has learned about the “adapted coping behaviors” some survivors have developed on their own to try to combat the trauma they’ve experienced. She’s seen how news about other mass shootings can trigger bad memories and fresh anguish among the former Columbine kids, now in their late thirties. At the same time, some have found solace in connecting with survivors of those shootings and adding their voices to the grassroots campaigns for school safety that have arisen out of the Parkland and Sandy Hook shootings.