

Victims' portraits diverse

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Cries of anguish and devastation carried across Clement Park on Wednesday, as throngs of students from Columbine High School gathered for an impromptu memorial and reunion in the aftermath of the worst school shooting in the nation's history.

"You see who's OK, and you cry," said freshman Chanelle Plank. "Then you find out who's not OK, and you cry some more."

Authorities did not release the names of the dead. But friends and relatives confirmed the deaths of some victims and the names of several others still unaccounted for.

Dead were teacher and coach Dave Sanders and students Daniel Mauser, Isaiah Shoels and John Tomlin. Still missing - and feared dead - were students Cassie Bernall, Corey DePooter, Matt Kechter, Rachel Scott and Lauren Townsend.

Surrounded by scores of newspaper and television reporters from around the world, the mourning students cried, hugged, reminisced and contemplated the rampage.

"I cried hysterically," said a shellshocked Melanie King, a 17-year-old senior who had been looking forward to her last 17 days of school. "I cried and cried and cried. Right now, I'm dry of tears."

She went from nihilism to born-again, to missing

Her name meant "helpful" and "earthly mother." Friends say it perfectly suited junior Cassie Bernall.

But not long ago, her church youth group leader said, she was a member of "the same sort of group that the killers were from."

At Dakota Ridge middle school, Bernall was enthralled by witchcraft, suicide and a view of life so dark that her desperate parents dragged her to a meeting with Dave McPherson, the youth group leader at West Bowles Community Church.

McPherson remembers that meeting with the sullen youth who spoke in monosyllables. He remembers what he thought afterward: "There's no hope for that girl. Not our kind of hope." A few weeks later, Bernall hurried up to him after a Sunday service.

"You'll never believe what happened," she said, and McPherson smiled in recognition.

She'd become a born-again Christian. She stopped hanging out with the nihilistic crowd and threw herself into the church youth group. She hung a "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelet on her backpack and carried a Bible along with the notebook in which she sometimes wrote poems.

In the past two years, Bernall became a regular at the Bible study classes on Sunday and Tuesday evenings, and at the Friday and Saturday youth group activities that included laser tag, bowling and trips to the movies. Her favorite movie was "Braveheart."

"Because of Mel Gibson, you betcha," Sara Vendras said, smiling tearfully, as she and other youth group members huddled on the steps outside West Bowles Community Church.

"Because of Scotland and England," added another close friend, Cassandra Chase, remembering how much Bernall loved visiting Britain. "She was always there for you," said her Columbine High School classmate and friend Kevin Koeniger.

Close to 1,000 people turned out at the church Wednesday night for a remembrance service for Bernall.

"Cassie was so faithful," Koeniger said. "She was always there for me. I wasn't there for her a lot of the time. We'd eat lunch together, and she'd always be in a good mood, and I wasn't. You'd just look in her eyes, and you'd know she cared.

"Now it makes me feel so bad. I wish I'd done the same for her."

Matthew worked hard to make the football team.

The wait was supposed to be over. Matthew Kechter was set to crack the starting lineup of the Columbine High School varsity football team in the fall. Years of practice and lifting weights had the 16-year-old prepped for a breakout junior year.

But Kechter, who was last seen in the library moments after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold began terrorizing students on Tuesday, was still missing late Wednesday.

"Matt would do anything for anybody," said Michael Mesch, who has been a friend of the Kechter family for four years.

Friends described Kechter as a straight-A student who will go out of his way to help fellow classmates.

"He had a real innocent look to him," said Dustin Hoffschneider, 17, a friend and teammate of Kechter's. "You could talk to him and make friends with him real fast. I don't understand why you would want to do something to someone like him."

Kechter used his smarts on the football field, where he was able to play a number of offensive and defensive line positions, Hoffschneider said.

Hoffschneider said he last saw Kechter early Tuesday during first-period weight-training class.

"Sometimes when I couldn't understand something in class, he would always be ready to help me," Hoffschneider said.

Kevin Parman, an assistant coach on Columbine's ninth-grade football team, described Kechter as a "real dedicated" student-athlete.

"He was a character," Parman said. "He liked to laugh, he played hard and he enjoyed himself."

Kechter was in the upstairs library with a close friend when he was last seen. After the friend crawled into a video room, he called out to Kechter to start moving, according to a friend's father, who asked to remain nameless.

"The last he saw of Matt, he froze," the father said.

Isaiah survives surgery -- but not the rampage.

Isaiah Shoels' family didn't think he'd survive the recent surgery he needed to repair a defect in his heart.

"They thought he was going to die then," longtime family friend Harold Berry said. "He beat those odds, but he couldn't beat the ones (on Tuesday)."

Shoels, an 18-year-old senior, was cut down in the massacre.

Late Tuesday night his family began to fear that Isaiah would never come home again, but they didn't find out for sure until Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas told them in person at 2:05 p.m. Wednesday. Although they knew in their minds that the news would probably be bad, his father, Michael, mother, Vonda, and his brother and sister still held onto a thread of hope until Thomas knocked on their door. "I still had hope inside," Michael Shoels told Thomas.

Michael Shoels told 9News that he believed his son was targeted both because of his race and because he participated in sports at Columbine. Students have said repeatedly that the shooters appeared to be targeting "jocks" and minorities.

"He had two strikes against him," Shoels said. "He was black and he was an athlete. That's why my son died."

Isaiah Shoels wanted to enter the music business, Berry said.

"He was going to try to go to a school of arts and study music; he was pursuing the music industry," he said.

Short in stature but big in heart, he played football at Lakewood High School and joined the wrestling team when he transferred to Columbine.

"He once benched twice his weight. No one had done that," said Pearce, a wrestling teammate.

Kristi Held, a senior, recalled that Shoels always had a smile and would offer a friendly greeting to anyone he passed in the hallways.

"He was the nicest guy," she said. "He was an innocent kid, never bothered anyone."

Shoels rode the bus with freshman Chanelle Plank.

"He was like the sweetest person," she said, breaking down in tears.

"Everyone knew him and liked him. Now we won't see him on the bus anymore."

Two friends dived under the table, but only one got up.

Corey DePooter, 17, loved to golf, hunt and fish with his friend Austin Eubanks. They considered themselves practically brothers.

When the shooting and bomb-throwing began, they were in the library and dived under a table together.

Eubanks made it out. DePooter never got up, his friend said.

And Wednesday, Eubanks could hardly talk about what happened.

He clung to the images of DePooter alive. Wrestling.

"He was an excellent athlete," said Eubanks, laid up at home with bullet wounds to his knee and his finger.

Studying.

DePooter had brains enough to get an academic scholarship for college, Eubanks and other friends were convinced. He earned good grades. More important, Eubanks said, "He worked at it."

His biggest frustration this year had been having his wisdom teeth pulled.

Complications forced him to miss school, Eubanks said. That bothered him.

Often he stayed over at Eubanks' house, in an extra room with a waterbed that DePooter called his "condo." His family life was great.

A mutual friend, Andrea Bannister, tearfully declared her highest admiration for DePooter. "A great guy." Wrestlers at a rival high school remembered talking with DePooter at meets last year.

DePooter and Eubanks fished together regularly. They enjoyed fishing so much that DePooter quit wrestling this year. He started working - a maintenance job at the Raccoon Creek golf club - for what had become their shared dream.

"He was working to save up to buy a boat with me," Eubanks said.

Over spring break, they set out for fishing on lakes south of Tuttle, Oklahoma, where Eubanks has relatives. On the way down, a big snowstorm hit. They shacked up in Colby, Kan. - and made the best of it, swimming in a Holiday Inn pool. They persisted in their adventure. And it paid off. Great fishing. Bass. That was the life.

Then came Tuesday at school.

The two were in the library around 11:20 a.m. When a woman ran in screaming that someone had a gun, Eubanks dove under a table with a guy he didn't know, a girl he didn't know, and DePooter. Nobody said anything. They listened to the gunshots. Then explosions. All downstairs. But then they heard explosions were on the second floor. Closer. For about 15 minutes they huddled there silently.

And the two buddies who had endured so much together were scared.

"Scared to death," Eubanks said. "I was just holding his hand ... I didn't know what was going to happen. I thought I was going to die."

The shooters entered the library. They began aiming underneath the tables.

And Eubanks dared to look up. He knew one shooter, he said - Dylan Klebold.

"I looked up right in his eyes," Eubanks said. "He was reloading."

And then it happened.

They cowered.

The shooter "sprayed bullets everywhere. And I made it out."

National honor student loved basketball.

Friends were also worried about the fate of 18-year-old Lauren Townsend, captain of the girls varsity basketball team.

Former teammate Taleen Maranaian, 18, said Townsend was "consumed" by the sport. Her mother, Dawn Anna, is the team's head coach.

"She loved it and was good at it," Maranaian said.

Townsend is also a member of National Honor Society.

"She was a very good student who wanted to major in biology," said Lisa Arnell, who coached Townsend during her sophomore year on the volleyball team. "She was a very disciplined person - mentally strong."

Arnell said that even though Townsend was on the varsity team she often came to the volleyball camps for sophomores, just to help out.

"She has a lot of friends," said Maranaian. "She was liked by everyone."

Teacher Sanders died helping others to live.

Business teacher Dave Sanders died a hero.

And that only adds to the pain of his loss, according to his students and colleagues.

"Oh, no! Mr. Sanders?" cried an anguished freshman, Candice Cushman, on hearing the news Wednesday. "Oh, no, no, no! Oh, God. Oh, God."

Cushman was one of a slew of students saved from the ricocheting bullets by Sanders, who screamed at her to hit the floor during Tuesday's rampage. He then went upstairs and aided other students before being shot to death.

"He saved my life," Cushman said. "Then there was this kid who got shot in the leg, and Mr. Sanders dragged him to the side so he wouldn't be shot"

again. He was the one jumping over the kids, getting people out of the way. Now we'll never see him again."

According to several students, the last thing Sanders said to them as the SWAT team led them out of the science room after 3-1/2 hours was: "Tell my daughter I love her."

"Anything he did, it was for somebody else," said Liz Carlston, 17, a junior.

"He did things quietly, and he didn't take credit for them."

It wasn't until he didn't show up at a teacher's meeting early Wednesday that his colleagues learned the worst.

"There were just so many good qualities about him, you always knew he would just be there for you," said Rebels softball coach Rick Bath, who recounted his friend through his own tears. "All he ever wanted to do was teach since we were 21. He wouldn't have known what else to do."

A softball and basketball coach in his spare time, Sanders was a favorite teacher of many.

"Our coaching fraternity at Columbine just lost a special guy," said Rebels football coach Andy Lowry.

Jason Fraser, a 1998 Columbine graduate who ran track for Sanders, called him a great guy.

"He treated every student with the utmost dignity," he said at St. Francis Cabrini Catholic Church on Wednesday, where he offered support to students seeking counseling.

After teaching at Columbine for 24 years, Sanders may have been most renowned for wearing "silly looking" pants and telling bad jokes in the hallway.

"His stories were pretty lame, but they cheered you up," said freshman Chanelle Plank, 15.

His sense of humor helped defuse teenage passions, such as when he stopped allowing his students to get restroom passes, knowing they were just headed to the school commons area to gossip.

"He did such a good job in a very unassuming way, and I think that it was made him so special. Whether it was in the classroom or on the playing field, he knew what this (business) was all about and he felt it wasn't place to standout. He was never for that," said Bath, one of his closest friends.

"All he really ever wanted was for the kids to do well, that was what made him the happiest."

Smart kid in track 'just coming into his own'

Daniel Mauser was a smart, shy boy who excelled in math and science but pushed himself to be an outgoing athlete.

"I think that's what I admired so much about my son," Tom Mauser said Wednesday night.

"He wasn't greatly athletic. He wasn't likely to stand up and speak to other people. Yet he took on these challenges of cross-country and debate. He tried to overcome these things. He was a very lovable kid."

Mauser was a sophomore at Columbine High who received all A's on his last report card. He ran cross-country, was on the debate team and recently returned from a two-week trip to Paris with his French club.

Tom Mauser, who works for the Colorado Department of Transportation, and his wife, Linda, have one other child, a 13-year-old daughter named Christie. Neighbors spoke only in the highest regard about Daniel Mauser, who was "just coming into his own," said neighbor John Brovsky.

"He was the nicest, most innocent young boy," Brovsky said. "He is just a great kid."

Although shy and reserved, Mauser was kind. A few years ago, for instance, an elderly man down the street from the Mausers became ill and Daniel was among the first to volunteer to help, Tom Mauser said.

"He went down there and raked the leaves and asked how he could help. He was a kid who wasn't ashamed to hug his mom," he said.

Tom and Daniel liked to ski and camp, and Daniel broke his arm a couple of seasons ago when he collided with a snowboarder at Breckenridge, his father said. Daniel Mauser could have been going to driver's ed and working on his permit, but he and his father decided to hold off until next summer so he could concentrate on his trip to France and his other school work.

If that seemed unusual for a teenage boy, "that was the kind of kid he was," Tom Mauser said.

"It was a privilege to know Daniel," Brovsky said.

Rachel wanted to be a missionary in Africa.

Rachel Scott wanted to help people. She was a member of a Christian youth group. Among her ambitions was to work as a missionary in Africa.

She was also a talented actress - appearing recently in a school play "The Smoke in the Room." She took practice for that play very seriously, said her 17-year-old friend, Rob Salyer. They worked together at a Subway sandwich shop near school and called themselves boyfriend and girlfriend for a while.

A widely popular 17-year-old, Scott somehow managed to do just about everything, from forensics, in which she excelled in the humor events, to earning top grades.

And her path crossed often with the paramilitary-oriented fellow students who committed the shooting rampage. They met regularly in a second-period class, video productions. But they never seemed to talk there, said 17-year-old Tyler Jackman, another student in the class.

In video productions, students broke into groups and used school video cameras to make movies and then edit their creations.

The suspects tended to focus on "cars blowing up" and simulated violence involving shooting using computer simulation equipment, Jackman said. "They were like, vulgar, their language and stuff. They didn't really think about being polite."

Meantime, Scott worked in a different group. She was passionate about choreographing Christian music as background in her productions. She liked to listen to Christian music, too. "She was a smart kid," Jackman said. Nobody noticed any conflict in that class. Jackman figured the killing was random - "coincidence," he called it. He missed video productions on the day of the shooting.

One of Scott's close friends this past year was Salyer. They worked long hours together at the Subway sandwich shop within a mile of Columbine High. For a few months at the end of last year, they went out regularly. They went to movies - romantic comedies were her favorites. They dined at restaurants such as Chili's. They bowled.

"She told me she wanted to help people," Salyer said. "She was telling me she wanted to go straight out to Africa."

When he learned about the shooting - his co-worker at Subway heard gunshots and explosions - he thought about the students labeled "the Trench Coat Mafia," the ones other students teased mercilessly. "I can understand how it feels to be picked on," Salyer said.

But late Tuesday night, his father told him his boss at Subway had called to say Scott was still unaccounted for, probably dead. The killing suddenly hit home, too hard.

"I just can't believe she's dead," Salyer said, hunching as he spoke in Subway.

Friends who didn't have to work gathered around Scott's red Acura by a parking lot outside the school. Scott apparently was working hard to earn money to earn that car she borrowed from her parents. The dozens of students who gathered laid flowers on the car and they huddled together, crying. Some knew Scott from forensics. Some knew her from World History class. Some knew her from the youth group at West Bowles Community Church.

"Everybody loved her," said Lynsey Hansen. "She was so caring. She was there for everybody who needed her. What stands out in my mind is her laugh and her smile."

As perfect a kid as you could have.

John Tomlin, 16, had been religious since he was a boy - and became a born-again Christian six months ago.

"He was really as perfect a kid as you could have," his father, John Tomlin, said late Wednesday. "He always called when he was going somewhere. He always called if he was going to be late for his curfew. He always did whatever was asked of him."

Patty Bernau, young Tomlin's aunt who lives in Wisconsin, said the Columbine sophomore was true to his friends and family.

"He had extremely good morals, a dynamic personality and a great sense of humor," Bernau said. "He accepted the Lord as a young child and always saw loyalty as an important thing."

At 14, Tomlin began working at a nursery to save up for the object of his dreams - a 4x4 Chevrolet truck he would eventually purchase just before his 16th birthday.

"Outside of school, his main interest was his truck," his father said. "His plans were to finish up school and join the Army."

The Tomlin family moved to Denver 4-1/2 years ago from Wisconsin. The family will most likely bury Tomlin in Wisconsin.