

Deeper Into Columbine

ALAN PRENDERGAST | OCTOBER 31, 2002

WESTWORD

Memo To:

Jefferson County Sheriff John P. Stone

Re:

Columbine

I know that you're a busy man. You've got a lot on your mind and only a few weeks to go before you clean out your desk. So I'll try to keep this short.

I realize, too, that you're tired of hearing about Columbine. Many people are. Folks in my business have the attention span of a hyperactive gnat, and most of them would rather move on to other horrors: the Beltway sniper, chronic wasting disease, the new fall sitcoms.

But it's different for you. On April 20, 1999, the worst high school shooting in American history happened on your watch, when seniors Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed thirteen people, injured two dozen more and then turned their guns on themselves. Your name and your department's reputation will be forever linked to this tragedy.

Frankly, one reason so many questions remain about Columbine, more than three years after the event, is that your people tried to thwart public scrutiny through a strategy of stonewall and spin control. Issuing an official report riddled with inaccuracies and glaring omissions, ducking the governor's review commission on the advice of the county attorney, lobbying state lawmakers to squash a legislative probe, cranking out self-serving press releases to fade the heat rising after each embarrassing revelation -- the basement tapes, the search warrant, the Harris diary, the confusion over who killed Daniel Rohrbough, to name a few -- all of this has done little to put the matter to rest.

Perhaps you believe that the recent settlements between the county and various families of the dead and injured, including the \$1.5 million coughed up to settle the lawsuit filed by the family of slain teacher Dave Sanders, closes the book on the shootings. It may surprise you to learn that there are still lawsuits pending (although none against your office) and that there are still people searching for the truth about Columbine, some of whom discuss their concerns in the following pages.

Sheriff, have you ever managed to wade through the 16,000 pages of documents released by your office over the past two years? (Released reluctantly, I might add, trickling out over months and years in response to court orders.) I wish I knew what you think about that material; our correspondence has languished, unfortunately, ever since my last letter to you was shanghaied by the county attorney's office, which issued a predictably obfuscatory response ("More Whoppers From Jeffco," October 25, 2001). At the very least, what the ballistics records reveal about the use of police firepower that day should trouble you (see "[Going Ballistic](#)").

There are so many haunting loose ends. Take the case of Sarah Cudworth, an eighteen-year-old interviewed by an Arapahoe County investigator less than two weeks after the shootings. Cudworth told the deputy that she'd been introduced to Eric Harris in 1997 by her friend Robert Craig, a Columbine honor student who killed his stepfather and himself later that year. Like Harris, Craig was a bright, moody young man who hung out with a disaffected crowd but was not a member of the Trenchcoat Mafia. His stepfather happened to be a former sheriff's deputy.

"Sarah told me they were all drawn together by their intelligence and boredom with school," the investigator wrote in his report. "Harris had a lot of hate, but he never told her about any plans to hurt anyone. Harris did talk about how he was harassed."

Eric Harris and Robert Craig. You'd think such a startling nexus of anger and despair would require some followup, but there is no trace of any subsequent interviews with Cudworth or anyone else on that point.

Or take a more current example, if you like. Recently, gun-rights activist Duncan Philp settled a lawsuit against two of your officers for \$20,000 -- an amazing sum for what seems, at first glance, to be a case of a faulty traffic ticket. Philp was pulled over by a Jeffco deputy last December on his way to a protest rally at the home of Columbine parent Tom Mauser, who has become an outspoken advocate for tougher gun laws since his son Daniel was killed in the school library by Harris and Dylan Klebold.

This was no random stop. Your deputies had Philp under surveillance that night and had compiled an intelligence file on him, not unlike the Denver Police Department's notorious "spy files." Philp beat the traffic ticket -- apparently, your deputies didn't know that a motorist doesn't have to signal a turn when pulling out of a private parking lot -- and then sued for alleged constitutional violations.

In a deposition, Don Estep, a member of Jeffco's intelligence unit and the FBI's multi-agency terrorism task force for Colorado, made several damaging admissions. He acknowledged that his unit had videotaped events the night of the protest but never logged that tape into evidence; that Philp had been cited for not having a valid Colorado driver's license when there was no proof that he was even a Colorado resident; and that a Jeffco sergeant had obtained information about Philp from the state motor vehicle database by telling a DMV official that Philp was under investigation for felony fraud, when there was no such investigation.

In another deposition in the case, investigator Kirk Beaulieu admitted that it's still policy in Jefferson County for individual SWAT members to report to headquarters, then proceed to the scene of trouble to stage a response -- a time-consuming procedure that hasn't changed since the Columbine shootings, even though other agencies' SWAT teams are trained to head directly to the scene. Beaulieu, you may recall, was one of the first SWAT guys to reach the classroom where Sanders lay dying, more than three hours after students and other teachers began trying to summon help for him.

Although the county admitted no wrongdoing in the Philp case, you can see why it was smart to settle the matter: Who needs all this dubious police work coming out in court? Small wonder, then, that Columbine families continue to doubt if your office has produced all the records it's been ordered to produce concerning the tragedy, if your people have come clean about what they know about Harris and Klebold -- and if the "lessons" for law enforcement have truly been learned.

Sheriff Stone, your work is almost done. Perhaps in the months ahead you will have the leisure to read Brooks Brown's book and find out how your campaign to discredit him devastated him and his family. Perhaps not. But take notice: The investigation of Columbine is far from over.

The Negotiator

In the aftermath of the Columbine shootings, the hunt for culprits began well before the funerals ended. By the next morning, everyone knew that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had committed the carnage, but had they acted alone? Who supplied their weapons? What did their parents know? What role did police and school officials play in the tragedy? And what about violent video games, drugs, Marilyn Manson and other presumably pernicious influences?

There were almost as many theories of liability as there were lawyers involved in the case. And that number quickly swelled to alarming proportions.

Going to meeting after meeting of plaintiffs' attorneys, who gathered around large conference tables at law firms across the city, Steve Wahlberg began to have the uneasy feeling that he was sinking into a quagmire. The meetings featured long discussions about what claims might be filed, which court to file them in, which defendants to name and what deadlines they were up against.

Wahlberg had been brought in as co-counsel by famed bulldog Walter Gerash to help represent students Sean Graves and Lance Kirklin, both of whom had been shot and critically wounded outside the school in the early stages of the attack. It didn't take many meetings for Wahlberg to realize that his clients were facing the

prospect of extremely complex, protracted litigation -- and that avoiding that process might prove even trickier.

He decided to advance what would turn out to be a controversial proposal. "I know that litigation is the hammer we will have to bring down," he announced at one meeting, "but I've got a kid in a wheelchair, Sean Graves. I was talking to him at his house last night, and he could use some kind of long-term medical trust. And I don't know if there's enough money here. If we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on litigation -- well, I want to go on record early that I support a settlement."

Wahlberg credits Graves with keeping him focused on a fundamental truth about Columbine. No amount of punitive litigation was going to bring back the dead or help the injured recover, and most of those who had suffered the worst injuries -- including Graves (who has since regained some mobility), Kirklin, Richard Castaldo, Anne Marie Hochhalter and Mark Taylor -- would require extensive medical care. So why not find out what resources were available among the potential pool of defendants and make the best possible deal for all concerned?

"This was an idea out of the mouth of an eleventh-grader," Wahlberg says now. "Do we really need World War III? How much money do they have, and will they give it to us?"

Over the next two years, Wahlberg emerged as the point man in what he describes as a "team effort" by the lawyers of victims' families to settle Columbine. The effort was only partly successful; but in light of the differing, often opposing goals of the families involved in lawsuits, it worked remarkably well. Wahlberg's pivotal role owed a great deal to his well-established and wide-ranging contacts within Denver's legal circles, as well as his reputation for evenhandedness.

"I try to bring a level of professionalism to what I do," he says. "It's more than being diplomatic. I think it's at the core of being able to get things done. All these petty fights my colleagues get in -- I'm critical of that, because they're screwing around and wasting time."

From previous cases, Wahlberg already had working relationships with several attorneys representing potential defendants, including the parents of Harris and Klebold. He soon learned that the Harrises had a maximum of \$300,000 in homeowners' insurance coverage and the Klebolds \$1.3 million; that the carrier for Mark Manes, who sold Klebold his TEC-9 semi-automatic handgun, could kick in another \$720,000; that Philip Duran, who introduced Klebold and Harris to Manes, could provide \$250,000; and that Robyn Anderson, the honor student who fronted for the gunmen in a straw purchase of their other guns at the Tanner Gun Show, had coverage amounting to \$300,000. In other words, if all the claims were settled at the insurers' policy limits, the total pool of cash available from that group would be close to \$3,000,000, with a small percentage set aside to address any future claims.

Yet the logistics of any negotiation were daunting from the start. Some of the defendants were eager to settle but wanted a "global" deal with every possible litigant. Several families of the injured and dead had no attorneys and no interest in litigation, and Wahlberg was in no position to negotiate on their behalf. ("Some of the parents were separated, and some of them weren't even speaking to each other," he recalls.) And what about so-called "zone of danger" claims that might arise from people who suffered no physical injury but witnessed the attack and might assert claims of emotional distress?

The plaintiffs decided to bring in the Judicial Arbiter Group, a well-respected private mediation service made up of prominent attorneys and former judges. It would be up to JAG to contact unrepresented Columbine families, to assess the potential value of various injury claims, and to decide how to divide up the settlement funds among dozens of plaintiffs. The amount of individual awards would be confidential, so that no one family would know what the others received. The arrangement had its advantages -- particularly since JAG refused to charge even an administrative fee for its services -- but it also created a dramatic rift between the families of the injured and those who'd lost a loved one at Columbine.

Under Colorado law, damages for wrongful-death claims have a statutory cap of \$366,000. Injury claims, depending on the circumstances, can be worth much more. The mediation process treated every death claim as being of equal value -- but how much is a dead child worth compared to a lifetime with a spinal cord or brain injury? The families of the severely injured had a legitimate argument that their financial needs were greater, but some of the families of the dead weren't eager to settle at any price: They wanted to go to court -- or at least to the discovery stage -- to find out what happened and why. Their attorneys hinted that an arrangement that allowed the killers' parents to fork over insurance money without digging into personal assets wouldn't satisfy all of the parties involved.

"The people with death claims had great resistance to these settlements," Wahlberg acknowledges. "They wanted a guaranteed percentage, but it was whatever the arbiter rules. I would have done a disservice to my client to treat all the claims equally. I'm sure some families didn't get very much money, in the final analysis."

But the alternative, Wahlberg insists, was much worse. "What if a jury found that Eric and Dylan are 99 percent at fault for what happened and everybody else is only 1 percent responsible?" he asks. "There's a scenario under which a jury could refuse to hold the parents or the gun suppliers responsible, and we would have lost the case. The overwhelming majority of the injured were behind the settlement."

Ultimately, the job of playing Solomon fell to JAG's Jim Carrigan, a retired Colorado Supreme Court justice and former federal judge. After months of reviewing medical records and other data, Carrigan worked out his own plan for awarding the \$2.85 million put up by the various insurance companies. He lamented that an adequate settlement would require millions more. "JAG spent enormous amounts of time trying to be fair," Wahlberg says. "How can you say that this injury is worse than that one, when they're all horrible? Carrigan really wrestled with this."

By the time the details were finalized, the alliance among the plaintiffs had fractured badly. The families of five slain students agreed to settle with the gun

suppliers but are still pursuing their lawsuit against the killers' parents. The family of a sixth, Isaiah Shoels, also refused to sign off on the Harris-Klebold offer and is pursuing its case against the parents, although the Klebolds' attorney recently filed a motion seeking to compel the Shoels family to accept the settlement with his clients.

Subsequent settlements followed. After U.S. District Judge Lewis Babcock threw out most of the families' claims against the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and the school district, those defendants decided to head off future appeals by offering the litigants a modest award: \$15,000 from each agency to each family. The one case against the sheriff's office that Babcock didn't dismiss, the Sanders case, was settled in August for \$1.5 million. ("I always thought that was a real good claim," Wahlberg says. "They let that man bleed to death. I don't fault the family for settling, but part of me would have loved to see that one go forward.")

Several cases are still pending, including claims against one of the gun vendors at the Tanner show and Mark Taylor's lawsuit against the manufacturer of Luvox, the anti-depressant prescribed for Eric Harris. Taylor's case has been ardently contested by the drug's maker, Solvay Pharmaceuticals, but it could lead to an airing of the killers' homemade videos at trial -- the first public glimpse of the "basement tapes" since December 1999, when they were leaked to *Time* magazine.

For the most part, though, the lawsuits have not shed much light on what happened at Columbine. The plaintiffs won a minor victory in their settlement with Robyn Anderson, which required her to give a videotaped deposition about the gun purchases she made for the killers. "It showed how cavalier the Tanner Gun Show dealers are about the law," Wahlberg says of the tape. "Let's say I'm 21 and you're eighteen, and we walk into a liquor store together. Can we have you pick out the bottle, show them my ID, and then hand you the booze and walk out? That's how it went down with Anderson."

The plaintiffs extracted money from the killers' parents but no fresh information about the events leading up the massacre. The negotiations with the sheriff's office were just as tight-lipped.

"It's a problem," Wahlberg admits. "Trying to get information was so frustrating. I couldn't believe the way the sheriff's office treated us. But they're concerned about liability, and so are the parents of Harris and Klebold. How do you even express remorse for these other families that lost children without sounding like you're at fault? Eliminating the specter of litigation would go a long way toward letting this community heal."

Early in the Columbine litigation, Wahlberg and other interested parties went to Governor Bill Owens to see if there was a way to establish a state funding mechanism that would compensate victims and allow public officials to divulge what they knew about the tragedy without fear of lawsuits. Owens declined to intervene, and Wahlberg moved on to other concerns.

He is now serving as a consultant, without charge, to families of victims of the September 11 attacks.

The Dissenter

Most days, Brian Rohrbough can be found working in his auto-sound shop in Sheridan, a place his son Dan used to visit after school. Nothing much has changed in the past three years except that Dan is no longer there.

The shop is bright, busy and cluttered with projects. Other than the piles of court filings and other paperwork stacked in one office, there is little to indicate the waking nightmare Rohrbough has been living since April 20, 1999, the day his fifteen-year-old son was shot down on the steps of Columbine.

Suspicious of the official version of the attack from the start, Rohrbough soon emerged as the most visible spokesman for several Columbine families who've fought relentlessly to learn the true circumstances of the shootings and the police

response that followed. It's been a long, bruising battle, one that has put Rohrbough at odds with Jefferson County officials, state lawmakers and others seeking a tidy "closure" to the messy tragedy. And it's far from over.

Three months ago, Rohrbough, his ex-wife, Sue Petrone, and the parents of four other slain students -- Lauren Townsend, Kelly Fleming, Kyle Velasquez and Matt Kechter -- agreed to settle their lawsuit against the sheriff's office. Because of the formidable immunity that protects government agencies from being sued for their actions, the plaintiffs believed they had little choice but to settle; the alternative was a costly appeal of Judge Babcock's dismissal of their claims and the prospect that Jefferson County would go after them for the county's own legal fees.

But even in settlement, Rohrbough's group won a key concession. The settlement states that the county won't oppose the plaintiffs if they seek access to certain sensitive Columbine materials, such as the killers' homemade videos, in connection with other litigation.

"I was encouraging my people not to settle, but no one had the stomach for it," Rohrbough says now. "No one wanted the risk of the fees. The real incentive was that we got them to open the door to us under court restrictions. We'll have the right to see the evidence under protective orders."

Rohrbough believes that a review of those portions of the investigation that haven't been disclosed to the public could help answer a range of questions about the killers' actions, what school employees and police officials knew about them before the attack, and what the police did after the attack was under way. "We want to know a lot of things," he says. "Who gave the orders not to go in? What was the real chain of command? Why did they lie to me about what happened to Dan?"

The changing stories about his son's death have been particularly galling to Rohrbough. The sheriff's investigators initially told him that Dan was wounded by Klebold, fell to the steps, then was killed by him at close range minutes later. The scenario didn't match up with the available ballistics evidence, and Rohrbough resisted it from the start. "Dan wouldn't have just laid there," he insists. "He would

have struggled, because he *wasn't* Klebold and Harris. He wanted to live. There was no bullet, no shell casings to support their claims. But it wouldn't have occurred to me that it might have been a police officer without Jim Taylor." Hours after the shootings, Arapahoe County deputy Jim Taylor told Sue Petrone that he'd seen Dan killed. Taylor and his wife had been friends of Petrone's for years, and his story -- later recounted on tape -- included several persuasive details, even though it clashed with the official version, which stated that Dan was shot before any police officers arrived on the scene. Taylor's account, along with other unreconcilable details in the physical evidence, prompted Rohrbough and Petrone to accuse a Denver SWAT officer of mistakenly shooting their son during the chaotic effort to rescue students.

The allegation angered law-enforcement officials and brought a wave of hate mail to Rohrbough's door. Cited as an eyewitness in court filings, Taylor at first denied that he'd ever told Dan's parents such a tale. Confronted with the tape of the conversation, which Petrone had secretly recorded, he told an internal-affairs investigator that he'd been "trying to console the family" and "help with the grieving" by placing himself at the scene of Dan's death ("There Ought to Be a Law," March 7). Arapahoe County Sheriff Pat Sullivan fired him two days later. As it turned out, both Taylor and the Jeffco investigators were wrong. Last spring, an independent probe conducted by the El Paso County Sheriff's Office concluded that Harris, not Klebold, had killed Dan in the early stages of the attack ("In Search of Lost Time," May 2). Less than a day after Rohrbough's settlement with the sheriff's office was finalized, he and Petrone filed suit against Taylor for defamation and outrageous conduct.

Rohrbough says the suit is necessary to untangle fact from fiction in Taylor's account. "We've waited for him to come and tell us why he lied to us, and he hasn't," he says. "He's caused us a tremendous amount of injury and expense. He implicated police officers in the death of my son by his statements. He implied that the timeline was a complete lie -- and he had credible information. The lawsuit has to do with accountability and an explanation for his actions.

"All the people lying to me about Columbine are police and school officials. It's like everybody had their own agenda, and I don't know what it is. If it was just sloppy police work, then they owe my family an apology."

Rohrbough expects to be thumped in the court of public opinion for filing yet another Columbine-related lawsuit; Sheriff Stone and other previous targets have claimed that the parents are simply "greedy" or looking for someone to blame. But for the families of the dead, the lawsuits have never been about money; if that were the case, they would have joined in the settlement Wahlberg negotiated with the killers' parents. Rohrbough's group refused to sign without being given an opportunity to question the parents concerning what they knew about their sons' activities. Discussions with the attorneys for the Klebold and Harris families are now at an impasse, Rohrbough says, and he expects the case to proceed to trial.

"I believe they had warning signs," he says. "I believe they rolled the dice, thinking it was close to the end of the school year and they could get their children through it, with total disregard for the other people in that school. They've chosen to lie about what they know, through third parties, and to pretend they didn't know anything."

Recently, the Klebolds went to court to oppose the release of Dylan's juvenile probation records, stemming from the teens' arrest for breaking into a van in early 1998. Harris's file has already been leaked to the *Rocky Mountain News*, and his parents have stated that they won't oppose public release of the records. But both couples have fought to keep their sons' writings and homemade videotapes under wraps, citing a concern that the tapes may inspire copycat killers, and they have repeatedly declined requests for media interviews or private meetings with the victims' families. Their long silence may be a result of the ongoing litigation, as Wahlberg suggests, but Rohrbough says it's also a primary reason the lawsuits continue to drag on.

"They've never had the decency to talk to the parents," he says. "The insult to injury is the premise that they're somehow in the same category as the families of

the victims in terms of their right to keep things private, and they're not. They raised a murderer; none of us did. Yet we've lived our lives under a microscope, and no one even knows who they are."

The Survivor

When Brooks Brown graduated from Columbine in the terrible spring of 1999, he still owed the school ninety hours of community service for smoking on school grounds. He figures he's paid off at least part of the debt by writing a book about the massacre and its aftermath, *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine*, which just arrived in bookstores.

Over dinner at a Littleton sports bar, Brown is expansive, confident, somber -- a 22-year-old author who's already had more experience in the public eye than most writers will experience in a lifetime. "The worst things that happen to you build the most character," Brown says. "I slowly learned that over the past three years and wanted to put that in book form."

Brown's own struggle with the mysteries of Columbine revolves around two life-altering events. In 1998, he discovered that his classmate Eric Harris had posted violent writings on his Web site, boasting of building pipe bombs and threatening to kill people -- including Brooks Brown. Brown's parents, Randy and Judy Brown, took the Web pages to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. It was the only serious attempt by anyone to alert authorities that Harris was dangerous.

The second event came thirteen months later. Minutes before the attack began, Brown ran into Harris in the school parking lot. Harris was pulling duffel bags out of his car. "Brooks, I like you now," Harris told him. "Go home."

Brown says he suspected that a school prank was in progress. He headed down Pierce Street, debating whether to skip his next class. Then he heard gunshots, and nothing was ever the same.

In the orgy of scapegoating that followed, his bizarre encounter with Harris became a source of endless speculation and suspicion. Classmates shunned him. School

administrators tried to discourage him from finishing the year with the rest of his class. Investigators grilled him and attempted to persuade his parents that he was a threat to their safety. Sheriff Stone branded him a "potential suspect" on national television.

Brooks and his parents embarked on a tortuous journey to clear his name and find out what happened to the complaints they'd filed about Harris months before, a journey that continues to this day.

Co-authored with Rob Merritt, an Iowa journalist Brown met on the Internet, *No Easy Answers* is largely Brown's own story, a work of recollection and meditation rather than reportage -- the story of a rebellious, Ayn Rand-reading adolescent who became an outcast in a school where jocks rule, narrowly avoided the killing spree, then was left to cope with his own guilt-by-association notoriety. It's also a soul-searching inquiry into what could possibly lead two fellow outcasts, kids he thought he knew well, to commit mass murder.

"I know plenty of kids who drew pictures of the school blowing up," Brown says now. "It was a joke. It became commonplace. A lot of kids share the situation Eric and Dylan were in, but they won't do what these two did. The fact is, Eric was beyond rage about things, all kinds of things. How he got that way is something people need to think about."

As his title suggests, Brown offers no definitive answers to explain away the tragedy. But the book does provide glimpses of the childhood of Dylan Klebold, a lonely, introverted youth Brown first met in grade school, and a more shadowy portrait of Eric Harris. It also paints a grimmer picture of the bullying situation at Columbine than school officials will ever concede. One memorable passage recounts how a group of seniors would "go bowling" with freshmen, squirting baby oil in the halls and then sending victims sliding into other students or crashing into lockers.

Brown insists that he witnessed such activities himself. "I was tall, so I blended in," he says. "It didn't happen to me, but it happened to people I knew. This one girl broke her leg."

But bullying has never been an adequate explanation for what happened at Columbine. You might as well blame video games or rock music, two bogus "causes" that Brown soundly rejects. He also is critical of what he regards as the exploitation of the tragedy by Christian groups, including a stream of books that have characterized the victims of the rampage as martyrs of their faith.

"There are no heroes or martyrs of Columbine, period," Brown says. "Cassie Bernall wasn't a martyr; she was a kid. Dave Sanders died a horrible death. Everybody did what they could. If there were heroes, it would be the janitors, who were getting kids out despite the gunfire."

Two years after the shootings, the Browns finally learned that a sheriff's investigator had drafted a search-warrant request for Harris's house in 1998 in response to their complaints. The document, hidden until CBS News went to court to pry it loose, contradicted several statements Stone's people had made about their dealings with the Browns and raised even larger questions about why the sheriff's office failed to investigate further ("Chronology of a Big Fat Lie," May 3, 2001). It's one of many questions Brown still has about Columbine, questions beyond the scope of his book.

"I want to know what Eric's and Dylan's parents knew," he says. "I want to know if any of their friends knew this was going to happen. I want to know what happened with the search warrant. And I want to know why the people in Jefferson County don't give a damn that the cops won't protect you when something like this happens."

Brown's book ends with a call for a wider dialogue about the roots of violence, one that would include more young people and those who, as he puts it, "think outside the norm." Toward that end, he's set up his own Web site for discussion of nonviolent protest (www.atlasisshrugging.org). He's also acquired an interest in

filmmaking after assisting Michael Moore in the making of his documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*. (He's visible but not identified in the movie's Kmart sequence, in which Moore and former Columbine students shame the chain into discontinuing sales of handgun ammo.) Recently, director Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *To Die For*) contacted him about possibly serving as a consultant on a feature film dealing with school shootings, one of several Hollywood projects in various stages of development that could keep the issues of Columbine before the public for years to come.

Poised to set out on a book tour, Brown isn't finished talking about Columbine; if anything, he's just starting. "If this book does well, I might do another one," he says. "There's so much about this that people don't understand."

The Contender

Unless he's really, really busy, Russ Cook answers his own phone. It's a habit that has earned the Golden police chief high marks from reporters over the years -- and left some of them wondering what he's trying to pull. Who ever heard of a cop who actually welcomes calls from the press?

Cook insists it's no act. He figures if he's forthright and candid, then the media will give him a fair hearing. "I won't engage in spin control," he says. "Obviously, if we did something, we're going to try to explain our side of it and put our best front forward -- but not to the degree to hide something. You don't want it to look like some goofball game. We serve the public. The truth should come out, and we should learn from what comes out."

As the GOP candidate for sheriff in Jefferson County, Cook is the likely successor to John Stone after next week's election. He's facing two write-in candidates, but his three decades of law-enforcement experience has made him the heavy favorite in the race since last spring, when Stone decided not to seek a second term. One of his opponents, Columbine parent Steve Schweitzberger, even declared that should

he win the race, his first official act would be to designate Cook as his undersheriff; Cook says he appreciates the offer but would rather have the top job, thank you.

The prospect of Cook taking the helm has raised hopes among the Columbine families of a new era of detente with the sheriff's office, an end to the bunker mentality that has gripped the agency since the massacre. "I think Russ Cook could be a real key to what we could learn," says Brian Rohrbough. "I can't see a better way for him to establish credibility than to find out what happened at Columbine and tell the families involved."

Cook responds cautiously to such a challenge. He says he realizes that the firestorm of criticism the office has received over its handling of the attack and the subsequent investigation has demoralized the troops and eroded public trust. But he's not in a position - not yet -- to promise that still-secret files will suddenly become public.

"I still don't know what the truth is with Columbine," he says. "I'm not privy to the information the sheriff's office has. I presume that most of what can be released has been released. I certainly don't want to traumatize people further."

At the same time, he adds, "At some point, I'm going to need to talk to the families. I want them to be comfortable with the sheriff's office."

Cook has long ties with many of the top commanders in Jeffco; some of them, including John Stone, worked with him on the Lakewood police force back in the 1970s. Although he's avoided attacking Stone directly, it's no secret that Cook has had his disagreements with the current sheriff. He backed Stone's opponent four years ago and has differing ideas about crisis management -- for example, to what degree an elected official should refuse to talk, "on the advice of the county attorney," when faced with demands for information about a litigious matter such as Columbine.

"The county attorney gives advice to policy-makers," he notes. "It's advice, not policy. Someone else has to decide if it's good advice or not. When you tell the

public you're not releasing something for their own good, they become suspicious. And if you're trying to avoid litigation, that might be the wrong reason.

"You cannot hide behind lawyers. I've probably been guilty of the same thing, but ultimately, you're responsible. You're an elected official."

Cook doesn't expect to be making any sudden, sweeping changes in the sheriff's office. "I'm going to be very slow to make any calculated moves at all," he says. "The people who work there are longtime county employees who I've known for a long time, and I will take my time evaluating their performance."

One of the most frustrating consequences of the Columbine litigation, he suggests, is that dedicated police officers have been unable to respond directly to the questions that have been raised, unable to tell their own stories about April 20 and its aftermath. Cook would like to remove that muzzle.

"The whole department has been living under a cloud," he says. "I would like to see that cloud lifted."

The Filmmaker

Shambling on stage like a fuzzy orca, Michael Moore arrives 45 minutes late for a Denver International Film Festival panel on gun violence and cinema. Blame it on America's current climate of fear: Moore missed his flight out of Newark because of terrorist-screening overload, then got trapped on an underground train at Denver International Airport for half an hour because of a security breach.

It's a wonderful bit of irony for a guy who's just made a movie about this country's obsession with guns and the fears engendered by that obsession, and Moore can't resist chewing on it. Before the panel discussion ends, he'll sing a song about items banned from airplanes, to the tune of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" ("...seven swords and sabers, six sticks of dynamite, five cat-tle prrrrods...").

The tone of the panel, which also features Columbine parent Tom Mauser and earnest film critics and up-and-coming directors, shifts abruptly after Moore shows

up, from somber dialogue to stand-up diatribe. Soon Moore is off and running on his favorite topics: stupid white men, the stupid occupant of the White House, the stupidity of capitalism, of males in general -- an orgy of self-loathing, really, couched as a denunciation of evil Amerika.

"I think Mother Nature is going to get rid of [men] because we're becoming a menace to the planet," he says. "What good are we? Nature is just going to weed us out...That's the other defect, we're Americans... Our ethic is everyone for himself, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, beat up on the poor, *me-me-me-me-me-me*. As individuals, we're very generous, but when we put ourselves together as a society, it's 'Fuck you.' Folks, the fish rots from the head down. When you've got a man in the Oval Office who thinks it's okay to launch a pre-emptive strike and kill first --" [Wild applause from slavishly adoring audience].

Those familiar with Moore's previous work -- his scathing appraisal of corporate greed in his breakthrough 1989 film *Roger & Me*, the cheap laughs exacted from bullying petty bureaucrats in his television shows *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*, the rambling screeds attacking callous conservatives in his best-selling books -- will find much familiar ground in his latest documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*. The film is Moore's most ambitious work to date, a sprawling attempt to explore the undercurrents of violence in American society, the nation's historic attachment to firearms, the racial bias of crime coverage in the media, possible links between economic and foreign policy and school shootings, and much more.

It's also, like its creator, a huge, unsightly mess.

As Moore readily admits, his movie has little to do with Columbine. But not only is the title a come-on, it's also flat-out wrong. It's based on the premise that, since Harris and Klebold went bowling on the morning of April 20 before shooting up their school, one could just as easily blame their rampage on bowling as, say, rock music. Actually, the evidence is clear that the gunmen skipped their bowling class that morning -- a detail Moore's researchers surely uncovered, just as surely as he chose to ignore it. Facts never matter to Moore when he has a good motif to milk.

(In failing to throw Brooks Brown's "freshman bowling" claim into the mix, he missed an opportunity to give the motif some actual punch.)

Some sequences work well. Interviews about Columbine with "celebrity experts" Marilyn Manson and Matt Stone, co-creator of *South Park* (South Park, Littleton -- what's the difference, really?), prove unexpectedly insightful. The trip to Kmart headquarters with Columbine survivors to protest sales of handgun ammo is a classic piece of Moore mau-mauing, showing the power of the media to alter corporate behavior. Much of the film, though, is preoccupied with oddball linkages that may be coherent only to Moore, such as his attempts to insinuate that the Columbine massacre owes something to the fact that Eric Harris's dad "flew planes during the Gulf War" or to the strong presence of the defense industry in Colorado. "I'm not saying that because Lockheed Martin is the number-one private employer in Littleton, there's a direct A-to-B correlation to the mass murder at Columbine," Moore explained during a brief press conference between film festival appearances. "What I am asking is that Americans take a look at all the little pieces of the threads of violence that permeate our society. I could plop my camera down in any area, not just Denver, and show the things I showed here."

But Moore did plop his camera down here -- and came away with surprisingly little for his trouble. Perhaps he found himself in over his head with the subject of Columbine (though a triple murder in a Littleton bowling alley months later helped to keep his motif alive). In any case, as the film lurches on, Moore's off to Canada and his familiar stomping grounds in Michigan, pursuing correlations that aren't A-to-B but A-to-Z, with steps B-to-Y missing. Moore's tortured cause-and-effect logic has him chasing down poor Dick Clark, of all people, to try to scold him about his policy of hiring welfare moms for his restaurants as part of a welfare-to-work program. If Clark wasn't doing such a disgraceful thing, Moore reasons, then he wouldn't have hired one Flint mother...who could no longer properly supervise her six-year-old son...who took an uncle's handgun to school and killed a classmate. Clark, to his credit, flees the scene before Moore can work up a proper froth of indignation.

Bowling for Columbine adds a new layer of ambiguity to the blame game that Americans play over its eruptions of violence. The usual suspects targeted after the Columbine shootings -- video games, death rock, violent movies -- have changed little in the past three years, and Moore suggests that their influence is far less insidious than the nation's casual attitude toward guns and its unblinking embrace of the military-industrial complex. But Moore's own list of culprits is so broad, his rap about "collective responsibility" so glib, that it verges on gibberish. When everything is everybody's fault, it's nobody's.

The most revealing moment in Moore's documentary comes when he's jerking around a Littleton home-security expert. The man mentions Columbine -- and suddenly chokes up. For several seconds, he can hardly speak, let alone continue with his sales pitch. "There's something overwhelming about that kind of viciousness, that kind of indiscriminate killing," the man says.

Yes, there is. Some events defy easy explanation, but that doesn't mean we should stop trying to understand them. Sadly, the word "Columbine" has become a buzzword for something dark and inexplicable, while much of what happened at Columbine, and why, has yet to be told.