

# LDS youth rely on faith in face of fear

## Prayer brings comfort during shooting rampage

**Gerry Avant**

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LITTLETON, Colo. — "I was trying to run and get away. I was just praying and praying, 'Please don't let me die. Don't let me die.' I wanted to see my family again."

That is how Carly Croft described her moments of fear and faith as two teenage boys brought death and injury to Columbine High School April 20. Carly is among 125 LDS students enrolled at the school in the Denver suburb where the young gunmen killed 12 students and a teacher and injured 23 others before they took their own lives.

The attackers also placed more than 30 bombs throughout the school and grounds. Some of the devices exploded during terror-filled hours while many students waited for police officers to determine it was safe for them to leave the various classrooms, closets and cubbyholes in which they had taken refuge. One LDS young man, Michael Johnson, sustained five gunshot wounds and a friend with whom he and three other LDS youth were discussing religious beliefs during their lunch break was critically injured. Michael was released from the hospital April 28. His friend was still hospitalized.

Some 50-60 LDS young men and young women spoke with the Church News individually and in groups about the incident which, as Lindsay Christopherson said, "took something precious away from us." The interviews followed testimony meetings held in various wards. (Because the Columbine Colorado Stake conference was set for May 1, members observed Fast Sunday and attended testimony meetings April 25.) Throughout the day, member after member expressed gratitude for lives spared, sorrow for lives ended and concern for injuries sustained. Tears flowed — tears of gratitude, tears of compassion, tears of

joy and tears released by fears, frustrations and, in many cases, exhaustion brought on by sleep interrupted by bad dreams.

During interviews, the young people requested that the Church News deliver a message for them. Anna Taylor summed it up: "Tell everybody that we're OK, and that Heavenly Father is real and He loves us all." "Tell them how we had the Spirit of the Lord with us in that place," said Amber Thomas, who took refuge with about 60 other students in a small office in the school's choir room. "We didn't know where the gunmen were, so we stayed quiet. Someone had a cell phone, so we could call the police and whisper to them where we were." As fear mounted, Amber turned to hymns to help her feel close to the Spirit. "I started singing 'I Am a Child of God,' 'Choose the Right' and other hymns," she said. "I couldn't sing out loud, so I lipped the words to help me concentrate on what I was thinking instead of what was going on around me. I kept the Lord in mind all during the crisis. I was praying. I heard a big bang. One of the bombs exploded. I thought, 'Why am I scared? I have the Lord on my side.'"

Two LDS young men, John Savage and Steven Greenwood, were among those in the school library, where some students were shot to death. "I was in the middle of the library, between shelves and under a table, so I didn't see what was going on, but I heard shooting," John said. "I was praying. I felt a peace that I couldn't logically explain. I heard them shoot Isaiah Shoels, and ask a girl, Cassie Bernall, if she believed in God. She said, 'Yes.' Then they shot her. "I was acquainted with one of the gunmen. We were in second hour calculus class. I had said 'Hi' to him a few times, but that was about all. He saw me and said, 'John, get out of here.' "One way that I'm coping is that I know there must have been some reason my life was spared, because it was right on the line there. I will try to live my life more purposefully and try not to let it go to waste." John went to the safety of a house where the seminary meets; a wood fence divides the house from the high school property. John was among some 70 people who took refuge in the seminary house. However, Steven didn't know what had happened to his friend after John left the library, whether he had been shot or had been allowed to go free. As did many other of the youth, he was worried about his friends, fearing as much for their safety and well being as much as for his own. Steven's presence in the library most likely helped save other lives. Columbine Colorado Stake Pres. Mark A. Baer said: "He is too modest to tell anyone. A freshman girl was sobbing. He was afraid that if she kept crying the gunmen would shoot her. Steven helped calm and quiet her. He

probably saved her life as well as the lives of those around her. I would say that he is a hero."

Three LDS youth were among the first to witness the shootings and notify the police. John Cook, Denny Rowe and Adam Thomas were on a hillside eating lunch and talking about religious beliefs with Michael Johnson of the Columbine 2nd Ward, who sustained multiple wounds, and a non-LDS friend, Mark Taylor, when the gunmen fired their first shots. "They shot a girl who was standing nearby, and then turned the guns on a boy down at the bottom of the hill. Then they took turns firing at us," said John Cook. Adam said that at first he thought the shooting was a hoax, that the girl had fallen down just to play along with some mock gunfire. "Then we saw that Michael and Mark were bleeding. Denny yelled, 'This is real. Run!'" Adam said. He described the gunfire as "a wave of bullets" that they heard and felt passing by them. The young men ran, not only to protect themselves but also to call the police and get help for their wounded friends. "We ran to a shed and stopped behind it long enough to ask each other, 'Are you OK?' We didn't know if the gunmen had followed us or not," Adam said. They ran across the football field, past the track, jumped a fence and called to a park's groundskeeper to call 911. One of them saw a police car, which he flagged down. The officer told the youth to keep running. "We still didn't know where the shooters had gone," Adam said. They found a telephone and, wanting to be sure authorities had been notified, called 911.

An LDS young man who received quite a bit of notice from the local and national media is Aaron Hancey, who tried to save the life of Dave Sanders, a teacher and girls basketball coach, who had been shot as he guided students to safety. Aaron was in the science room down the hall from the biology classroom where the teacher collapsed. Another teacher went into the science room and asked if anyone knew first aid. Aaron stepped forward. Calling on what he had learned in Scouting, Aaron took charge of administering first aid. Reported the Denver Rocky Mountain News on April 25: "For the next three-and-a-half hours, as the fire alarm and class bell wailed non-stop, Hancey and classmate Kevin Starkey took turns applying pressure on the bullet holes, hoping to stem Sanders' bleeding. "This was way beyond the Boy Scout first aid manual. 'You're trained to deal with broken arms, broken limbs, cuts and scrapes. Stuff you get on a camping trip,' Hancey said. 'You never train for gunshot wounds.' "Yet here he was, rolling Sanders from side to side on the tile floor, keeping him awake and off his back so he wouldn't choke on his own blood, pressing the heels of his hands to the wounds." While Aaron's efforts

helped prolong the teacher's life, they weren't enough. Mr. Sanders died of his wounds after SWAT team officers directed students from the room. Later, Aaron met with Mr. Sanders' family to deliver the teacher's final message of love to them.

Sheer terror gripped all of Littleton while parents, siblings, relatives, neighbors, friends and even casual acquaintances waited for hours to learn what was happening at the school and whether the students were safe. Many families had more than one child enrolled at the school.

Amber and Adam Thomas, quoted earlier in this article, are brother and sister.

The incident, they said, taught them how much they love their family. Asked to tell what she thought about while she waited out the siege with other choir students, Amber said, "Adam and I had been arguing all week. I was wishing that we had not done that." When Adam learned that his sister was still in the school and that bombs had been planted inside, he worried about her safety. "It was several hours before I found out that she was OK," he said. "When I finally saw her, I gave her the biggest hug that I've ever given her."

Many of the LDS youth echoed Amber's comment about what is really important: "My thoughts were about my family and other people. I couldn't care less about how I looked. Something like this teaches us that things such as in-style clothes aren't important. There's no point in paying a lot of attention to things like fashions, makeup, and sports just to impress people. They won't remember you for that."

Grant Taylor shared one lesson he learned: "I really do love my family. I'm a lot nicer to my little brothers and sisters."

Marty Layton said that he has gained an understanding of how precious life is. "It's the best thing there is. It's not something to be thrown away," he said. "When I left home that morning, I didn't think that I might not see my family again. Now I know that every minute is precious."

Kelli Gunter said that she learned about heeding the promptings of the Spirit. "I had thought about not going to seminary, that I would go the library to do homework and study," she said. "As I walked down the hallway, I felt something

tell me that I needed to go to seminary. It was no big deal; I didn't question it. I just went on to seminary." That "something," she said, was the Holy Ghost.

No one understands why the gunmen turned on their classmates. Some of the LDS youth said that they and their friends are puzzled about why the media have been quick to say that the shooters killed classmates because they had been made fun of or ostracized. The young people said that the killers had acted as though they wanted to be outcasts, that they routinely resisted any kind of friendliness.

Liz Carlston indicated that she and other students might learn great lessons from the tragic incident. "In the Book of Mormon, I read about the wars and people getting killed and I thought, 'This doesn't relate to me. We're not going through that, how does this relate?' I always thought that maybe when we grow up and have some challenges, like a family crisis, then the Book of Mormon would start relating to us. Then you hear of stuff like this. . . . It's just really hard and confusing. It's great to have the scriptures because when you have an experience you can read about what the people in the scriptures did to overcome their trials and afflictions, how passionately they prayed to Heavenly Father and how He blessed them and comforted them. I know that we can have our own comfort from Heavenly Father through prayer."