



Austin Eubanks and best friend Corey DePooter hid under the same library table during the 1999 attack on Columbine High School.

Courtesy photo

Columbine Survivor Shares Story of Addiction on Tragedy's Anniversary

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WESTWORD

Moving from a small town in Oklahoma to oh-so-sophisticated Colorado, Austin Eubanks found it difficult to fit in. But toward the end of his freshman year at Columbine High School, he came across Corey DePooter — a guy who, like Eubanks, appreciated the simple joys of golf, fly fishing and country music. The two quickly became best friends, and Eubanks figured high school was going to be bearable after all.

It was. Right up until one day seventeen years ago — April 20, 1999 — when everything went horribly wrong.

DePooter and Eubanks were sitting in the library at lunchtime, talking about getting in some fishing after school, when art teacher Patti Nielson ran in, dialed 911, and shouted for everyone to get under the tables; her arrival coincided with the sounds of explosions and gunfire out in the halls. DePooter, Eubanks and two other students ducked under one table. Four minutes later, gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into the library and began randomly shooting people.

Klebold fired his shotgun under table 14, fatally wounding DePooter and spraying pellets that hit Eubanks in the hand and knee; seventeen-year-old Jennifer Doyle was also wounded in the hand. DePooter was the last of ten students murdered in the library that day. The gunmen soon left, and Doyle and Eubanks made their dazed way outside.

Up until the attack on his high school, Eubanks had never used alcohol or drugs. But the trauma of watching his best friend die sent him on a dark, decade-long journey in flight from his own grief. He never went back to Columbine, opting to be home-tutored right up to graduation. He became increasingly dependent on the painkillers the doctors prescribed for his injuries. "As the prescriptions ran out, I turned to illicit substances," he recalls. "I continued to manipulate doctors into writing more prescriptions and got to the point where I was using opiates every day. I never had to feel anything that way."

His parents urged him to seek counseling. The therapists said he seemed shut down. He preferred Oxycontin — eventually more than 300 milligrams a day, smoked or snorted — and a bump of Adderall first thing in the morning. Then, when he *really* wanted to shut down, a chaser of Xanax.

Eubanks found work in the advertising business, an industry known for hard-drinking execs and hyper-creative types and fabled indulgences in chemicals to help make it through the long hours and the dull spells. Although he seemed to

thrive in the game, he also began to run afoul of the law, for offenses ranging from auto theft to bad checks.

"I would describe myself as a rational and well-rounded person, but I was using substances to the point where it shut down the frontal lobes of my brain," Eubanks says. "Everything I did was on impulse, whether it was sexual relationships or stealing or drug use."

Five years ago, at the age of 29, Eubanks woke up in a jail cell with no clear idea of how he'd gotten there. He'd been passing out in restaurants and had been picked up for a probation violation. He had been an addict for twelve years, been to rehab three times and relapsed every time. But this time, with the help of the Stout Street Foundation, he turned it around: "I looked for a treatment center, sat down in their office, and said, 'Tell me what to do. I'm done fighting. I learned every way that didn't work.'"

After years of hearing how he was powerless and had a disease, Eubanks learned a different lesson from Stout Street, one that made him think about the potential he was squandering. "More than anything, they focused on empowerment," he says. "I credit them with saving my life."

It's an approach that Eubanks has adopted as his own in his current job as program director at The Foundry, a substance-abuse treatment center in Steamboat Springs. He's become a vocal critic of opiate over-prescribing, particularly among young people, and tells his story "to put a face behind the statistics."



Austin Eubanks today: "Fishing is something I lost in my addiction."

And, yes, he's come to terms with the sorrow over the loss of his best friend so many years ago.

Ironically, in Colorado these days, April 20 is less a solemn anniversary of the Columbine shootings than it is an excuse for getting baked. But you won't find Eubanks at any 4/20 festivities today. He'll be on the river, thinking about an old friend.

"I go fishing," he says. "It's a day for me to remember Corey. Fly fishing is something I lost in my addiction. Now it's something I can do to remember him."