

What Really Happened At Columbine?

Did So Many Have To Die?

April 17, 2001

David Kohn, 60 Minutes Correspondent

In recent months, America has witnessed a wave of shootings at its high schools. Each new eruption of violence brings comparisons to another murderous rampage - at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado.

It's been two years since Columbine, and today, many people - especially some parents of the murdered children - still believe the worst school massacre in American history might have been averted if the Sheriff's Department and school authorities had done their jobs.

60 Minutes has been investigating the shootings at Columbine for the past six months, and has found new and surprising information about what happened there. Some of that information was in the Sheriff's files - undisclosed - until CBS News went to court to have it released. And some of it comes from two former security officials at the school district who say that eight months before the shootings, they developed a plan that they say might have prevented the killings, a plan that they say the school all but ignored.

On April 20, 1999, 18-year-old Eric Harris was in the garage of his home, filling duffel bags with bombs and rigging weapons in his trenchcoat. A few miles away, 17-year-old Dylan Klebold was preparing his own weapons. Then they drove to Columbine High School.

It was a warm spring day, and a lot of students there were eating lunch outside. Danny Rohrbaugh, a freshman, was outside with some friends. It was 11:19. For the next few minutes, the students in the cafeteria heard gunfire. As a school security camera recorded them, some of those students looked out to see Danny lying dead on the sidewalk. He'd been shot three times. The attack on Columbine had begun.

At 11:23, as students hid under tables, a cafeteria worker was already on the phone with a 911 operator.

Just outside the cafeteria, Harris and Klebold killed two students and wounded six more. Then they turned away from their victims and headed for

The Affidavit

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Warning: document contains graphic language.

the school's west entrance. As the gunmen headed into the school, business teacher and coach Dave Sanders rushed through the cafeteria, telling the remaining students to stay down, then headed upstairs to help others. As he turned a corner, he was shot.

"He just had a great heart for kids," says Rich Long, his friend and fellow teacher. Bleeding heavily, Sanders staggered into a science room.

Art teacher Patty Nielson was on hall duty just inside the west doors when she saw Eric Harris. She ran inside and called 911. The dispatcher told her that help was on the way.

Police were at the school right away. Within five minutes of the first shots fired, the sheriff's deputy assigned to work at the school was in the west parking lot. He exchanged gunfire with Harris who retreated into the school. That deputy was soon joined by six other policemen who took positions around the building. None of them entered the school, where Harris and Klebold were heading toward the library, shooting in the halls and throwing bombs into the cafeteria below. They walked into the library and began shooting students.

Among those killed there was Sophomore Kelly Fleming. Her parents, Don and DeeDee, say that the police should have entered the school earlier.

"There was no one in that school that had a gun other than the two killers," says DeeDee. "And no one pursued them. No one tried to engage them."

"For almost 20 minutes she waited. Twenty minutes, that's a long time for someone to have the opportunity to come in and make a difference."

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office declined to speak with us, but in a letter, Sheriff John Stone described the Columbine attack as a "unique set of circumstances, the magnitude of which no one had dealt with before." He also cited some of the obstacles that kept his men from entering the building right away - including bombs, booby traps, and a lack of information about how many gunmen were in the school.

Other parents are also angry. "They're listening to kids getting shot and murdered inside the library over a 911 call and their job is to protect people," says Bruce Beck, the stepfather of Lauren Townsend, another student who was killed in the library.

In his letter, Sheriff Stone said that by taking positions around the building and waiting for SWAT teams to arrive, his officers were doing what they were

trained to do. He said his officers "responded quickly, returned fire, deployed appropriately and safely extracted hundreds of trapped and terrified students and teachers." He also asked us to talk to Larry Glick, who directs a national organization that trains SWAT teams.

"They believed that they really had six to eight armed individuals inside there," says Glick of the police outside the school. "And if you're in those shoes of those officers, they felt that it was more reasonable to wait until additional personnel responded to move in."

Harris and Klebold then left the library and walked downstairs to the school commons. They were in no hurry. Harris stopped for a drink of water. Klebold wandered through the cafeteria, then lobbed a pipe bomb toward the window. It started a fire that could be seen by police officers outside the school.

When student Evan Todd came out of the school, he told police that there were wounded students in the school. He even told them how he had come out of the school. But no policeman went in that door, the shortest route to the library and to the science room, where Dave Sanders lay wounded. When Todd came out that door, there were at least 20 police officers surrounding the school. But by the time the first SWAT team was assembled and geared up to enter the building, it was 12:06 - 47 minutes after the shooting had begun. That SWAT team entered on the side of the building farthest from Dave Sanders, and from the library, where some survivors lay hidden among the dead.

By the time Klebold and Harris committed suicide at 12:08, at least 75 police officers were surrounding Columbine High School. The first SWAT team had been in the building only two minutes. It would be nearly three hours before they would know the gunmen were dead. As the day wore on, hundreds of police and rescue workers responded to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department's call for help at Columbine High. Throughout the day, nearly a thousand police officers and rescue personnel from 47 agencies arrived at the scene. Many of those officers spent the entire day with nothing to do, waiting for an assignment from commanders on the scene.

While the crowd of reporters and worried parents grew outside the school, students and teachers in Science Room Three struggled to get help for teacher Dave Sanders, who had been bleeding profusely since he was shot at 11:26.

Melanie Poleshook, a sophomore, was in the room with him. "There seemed like there was a lot of officers walking around outside with nothing to do," she

says. "And I don't know why they couldn't have sent maybe a few more people directly to come to our room."

Just before noon, Mike Rotole put a sign in the window. It said, "One bleeding to death." The Jefferson County Sheriff's command post was well aware of Dave Sanders' condition and where he was. Since 11:42, a teacher in the room with Sanders had been on the phone with operators at Sheriff's headquarters. And once Mike Rotole put the sign in the classroom window, radio calls started coming from officers urging the command post to rescue him.

At 1:10 PM - nearly two hours after the first shots were fired - a SWAT team finally entered the west side of the school building, where injured victims were waiting for help. Immediately they faced a maze of flooded rooms, fire alarms, and smoke. But worse than that, according to members of that SWAT team who asked not to be named, the command post never told them there were injured victims in the library or the science rooms.

At the same time, police dispatchers were telling the teachers and students with Dave Sanders that help was on the way.

"They'd say "Oh we'll be here in like 20 minutes," says Mike Rotole, a student who was in the room with Sanders. "So we'd, you know, get ready and lay there. And then no one would come." Rotole says this went on for three hours. Sanders was conscious almost the entire time.

As Dave Sanders lay bleeding, SWAT officers directly below him were evacuating classrooms full of children stranded on the first floor. Then they had to escort those children out of the cafeteria, past the dead bodies of their classmates, and on to safety.

Larry Glick, an expert on SWAT tactics, says it was required procedure at that time for SWAT officers to clear each room before moving on to the next.

For two and a half hours, the first SWAT team cleared classrooms on the side of the school farthest from where most of the shooting had taken place. A second team evacuated students and staff from the rooms around the cafeteria. When the Sheriff's command post finally told that SWAT team to look for Dave Sanders - they didn't know where to go.

SWAT officers finally reached Dave Sanders in Science Room Three at 2:42 - more than three hours after he'd been shot. They evacuated the kids right away, but held Sanders there to wait for a paramedic. That paramedic didn't arrive for another 42 minutes.

"We said 'Well can we carry him out, you know, let us carry him out,'" Rotole says. "And they said 'No, we need to get you out safely. And there's paramedics on the way right now.'"

But by the time a paramedic finally got to Dave Sanders, at 3:24, he was already dead. Sanders was the last of 15 people to die at Columbine that day. Twenty-three wounded were taken to hospitals. Six had brain or spinal injuries. Several nearly bled to death. Doctors at six hospitals worked on wounded children all through the night, and saved every one of them.

Did authorities miss red flags that might have helped them avoid the tragedy? Read Part II

Part II-

Columbine: Were There Warning Signs?

Should School Officials Have Known?

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A year before the attack, Joe Schallmoser and Howard Cornell were worried that Columbine was just the kind of place where a school shooting might happen. They were in charge of security for the school district that included Columbine. After the shootings in Paducah, Ky., and Jonesboro, Ark., they were afraid that one of their schools might be next.

In August of '98 - a full eight months before the attack on Columbine - Cornell and Schallmoser wrote a security plan that required school officials to notify and meet with parents and law enforcement officers as soon as they learned of "a threat by any student" to "commit any act of violence." They say Columbine didn't follow the plan.

When Cornell and Schallmoser presented their plan to Columbine, the school had already been alerted that one of its juniors, Eric Harris, might be dangerous. At night, Harris and his friend Dylan Klebold had been building an arsenal and making plans to use it - plans that Harris wrote about on the Internet, on his Web site.

In 1998, Brooks Brown was a junior at Columbine. That March, he found his name on Harris' Web site. Harris was threatening to kill him.

"When I first saw the Web pages, I was utterly blown away," Brown says. "He's not saying that he's gonna beat me up, he's saying he wants to blow me up and he's talking about how he's making the pipe bombs to do it with."

Brooks' parents, Randy and Judy Brown, say they were horrified by the Web site and frightened of Harris, who lived nearby. They decided to take pages from the site to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, where an investigator told them that Harris already had a criminal file. He and Dylan Klebold were on a form of probation, for breaking into a van and stealing equipment.

"I was utterly dumbfounded that they did nothing with the Web pages," says Brooks Brown. "Eric was saying how he was gonna blow people up. 'Hey, I'm making pipe bombs. I've got the designs for them on my Web site. I'm gonna kill these people. Here's why.' That's a level beyond making a joke."

At first, the sheriff's department denied its investigators had even met with the Browns in person. But we obtained this police paperwork, showing those investigators not only "met with Mrs. Judy Brown," but then worked on a warrant to search Eric Harris' home. Even more surprising, one document shows a sheriff's deputy found "a pipe bomb... consistent with the devices" Harris described on his site. But the sheriff's department never searched - or even visited-the Harris home. It was April of '98 - a full year before the Columbine massacre.

"People are covering up everything that went wrong and I want those lessons out there," says Judy Brown. "They're doing studies, they're getting profiles. Everybody's trying to get programs going and what we can do. Well guess what? All the signs were there. You know what the lessons are? Do your job."

After their meeting with the Browns, sheriff's deputies did warn administrators at Columbine that Eric Harris might be making pipe bombs. But according to a school district official, Sally Blanchard, the school had no reason to look into the matter further.

"The deans were told that there was an investigation under way," says Blanchard. "That they weren't to do anything. That it was informational on their part, only. So they actually took no action because certainly they wouldn't have wanted to interfere with an ongoing investigation."

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Columbine's administrators admit that didn't include speaking to his teachers, family, or friends about him. One of those friends, Nate Dykeman, says that Harris and Klebold were showing off their weapons to people, long before they attacked Columbine. One day at Harris' house, Dykeman says, Harris showed him a pipe bomb.

Devon Adams was a sophomore at Columbine in 1998, when she found her name on Harris' Web site - on his hit list. She says that she told an assistant principal at Columbine that Harris had threatened her. The assistant principal now denies that Adams ever spoke to her about Harris. By that time, Klebold and Harris had already bought a rifle, a semiautomatic pistol and two sawed-off shotguns.

According to Dykeman, Harris and Klebold also made video tapes of themselves shooting their guns and played them in school. School district officials say because of pending lawsuits they cannot disclose whether any teacher saw videotapes of Harris and Klebold's guns.

Says Blanchard: "What people saw in the school were that these two were going to classes every day, they had friends, they were turning in assignments, they were working towards higher grades in their classes, they were planning the future."

In February of '99, Dylan Klebold turned in a story he wrote about an assassin in a black trench coat who shoots down students and bombs the city. "The man unloadeone of the pistols across the fronts of [the] four innocents," Klebold wrote. "The...streetlights caused a visible reflection off of the droplets of blood...I understood his actions."

Klebold's teacher later called it "the most vicious story she'd ever read," and voiced her concerns about it to Klebold's parents and his school counselor. But no school official ever looked into the matter, and it ended there. It was two months before the shootings.

According to Howard Cornell, that story gave Columbine's administrators yet another opportunity to head off Klebold and Harris - and yet again, they missed it.

In a letter, school district officials said that Cornell and Schallmoser's plan applied only "when a district employee 'becomes aware of a student who threatens to kill someone" - a standard they say didn't apply to Harris or Klebold.

But that's not what the plan says. The plan goes into effect when a student threatens "to kill another student or commit any act of violence." That standard did apply to Eric Harris.

Where were Harris and Klebold's parents all this time? They have never spoken publicly about Columbine, but in police interviews they said they had no idea about the arsenal of weapons their sons were amassing in their bedrooms - including knives, guns, cans full of gunpowder, coils of bomb fuse, and bombs - more than 100 of them, including pipe bombs, propane bombs and homemade grenades.

At night, while their parents were asleep, Harris and Klebold made video tapes in which they talked about all the weapons they had. Harris imagined his parents saying, "If only we had checked his room. If only we had asked more questions."

Two years after the shootings, families of the victims say they still don't know exactly what happened that day at Columbine, and whether their children might have been saved. Sheriff John Stone isn't talking - not to the families, not even to a Colorado Governor's Commission investigating the shootings.

The families have gone to court - they've filed nine separate lawsuits against the sheriff's department, the school district and the parents of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

And yet, in spite of all its unanswered questions, some good has come out of Columbine. Young people are speaking up when they see signs that other kids may be planning violence, and police throughout America are being trained to act immediately when a killer takes control of a building - and not to stand by and wait for the SWAT teams to arrive.

Still, Columbine would seem to be the place where we can learn the most about school shootings and how to prevent them in the future. But two years have gone by, and some of those who know the most - school and police officials - are still not telling us everything they know.

AFFIDAVIT-

98-3365

COURT, JEFFERSON COUNTY,
COLORADO

INVESTIGATOR MIKE GUERRA, being duly sworn upon oath says:

That the foregoing offense(s) alleged was committed of this affiant's own personal knowledge, and the facts stated therein are true.

Your affiant is of lawful age and a sworn peace officer of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, Golden, Colorado, in the County of Jefferson.

Your affiant states that the following facts are true and based upon his/her personal knowledge, as a result of his/her conversations with the persons named herein and reviewing their written reports.

On March 31, 1998, your affiant met with Investigator John Hicks and Investigator Glenn Grove of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department. Investigator Hicks advised your affiant he met with Mrs. Judy Brown reference Eric David Harris, aka: Reb Doomer, who had been making threats on the Internet to her son, Brooks Brown. Investigator Hicks gave your affiant copies of this information, consisting of 12 pages retrieved from Eric David Harris's website (<http://members.aol.com/rebdoomer/index.html>). Eric David Harris is known personally to Brooks Brown.

Your affiant read through the information and found that Harris describes building pipe bombs using materials such as pyrotechnics powder and fuse from commercial fireworks that he had disassembled.

Harris labeled the devices as "Atlanta" and "Pholus" and describes each as being 1 1/4 inch by six inch PVC pipe. Harris describes another device, "Peitro", as one inch by six inch PVC pipe and "Pazzie" as 3/4 inch by five inch PVC pipe. Harris states each is packed with powder from fountains, mortar shells and crackling balls, and each has a +14 inch mortar shell type fuse.

On February 15, 1998, at 4:00 p.m. there was a report of a pipe bomb placed in the field near Garrison and Field street county of Jefferson

State of Colorado. Investigator Glenn Grove, of the Jefferson County Bomb Squad, was dispatched to that location. Investigator Grove arrived, located and rendered the device safe. Investigator Grove described the device as a 1 1/4 inch by six to eight inch PVC pipe, with a red fuse. Contained in the pipe was a gray, flaky powder. These items are consistent with material found in the type of commercial fireworks Harris described as components of his explosive devices.

The size is consistent with the devices labeled by Harris as "Atlanta" and "Pholus".

Statements contained in the documents received from Mrs Brown from <http://members.aol.com/rebdoomer/index.html> are as follows:

"Philosophy So that's the only way to solve arguments with all you fuckheads out there, I just kill! God I cant wait till I can kill you people. Ill just go to some downtown area in some big ass city and blow up and shoot everything I can. Feel no remorse, no shame. Ich sage FICKT DU! I will rig up explosives all over a town and detonate each one of them at will after I mow down a whole fucking area full of you snotty ass rich mother fucking high

Subscribed and sworn to before me.

Dated _____

Notary Public

COURT, JEFFERSON COUNTY, COLORADO

INVESTIGATOR MIKE GUERRA, being duly sworn upon oath says:

That the foregoing offense(s) alleged was committed of this affiant's own personal knowledge, and the facts stated therein are true.

strung godlike attitude having worthless pieces of shit whores. i don't care if I live or die in the shoot out, all I want is to kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can, especially a few people. Like brooks brown".

Based on the aforementioned information your affiant respectfully requests the court issue a

search warrant for the residence located at 8276 South Reed Street, County of Jefferson,

State of Colorado, described as:

single family dwelling, situated on the north side of S. Reed Street. The residence is wood and brick constructed consisting of blue painted siding, gray wood trim and a wood shingle roof.

for the purpose of searching for the following:

materials, components, literature, books, video tapes, and any drafts, or notes pertaining to manufacture of pyrotechnic devices, improvised or commercial explosives. Electronic mail messages which were sent or received from the address to establish ownership; paper work which shows ownership of occupancy of the residence.