

# Amid Carnage and Chaos Came Heroism

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LITTLETON, Colo, April 21 – There were killers in the halls of Columbine High School, yes. But there were also students like Aaron Hancey, and teachers like Dave Sanders.



An injured person is loaded into an ambulance outside Columbine High School on Tuesday. (AP)

When the explosions roared and bullets began flying, panicked students saw Sanders, the much-loved coach of the girls basketball and softball teams, standing bravely in a smoke-filled hallway, urgently directing them toward an escape route. Suddenly, the longtime Columbine fixture was reeling, shot twice, through-and-through wounds in each shoulder.

He staggered through the door of a nearby classroom, where terrified teenagers saw him begin to cough blood. Panic: Did anyone know first aid?

A teacher rushed to the next room, where he found Hancey, 17, a junior with Boy Scout training in first aid. Swallowing his fear, Hancey followed the teacher, Kent Friesen, out of the relative safety of the room and into the awful corridor. The air was noxious, the floor was littered with shells and debris.

He found Sanders in a red pool on the white linoleum floor. Hancey peeled off his white Adidas T-shirt and urged the other boys in the room to do the same. Some of the clothes were made into a pillow. Other shirts were pressed into Sanders's wounds. The boy checked the man's airway.

There was a telephone in the room, and Hancey called his father, who used a second line to call paramedics. The elder Hancey relayed questions and advice. For the next three hours, Hancey led a children's crusade to save their teacher's life.

They pressed constantly on the wounds. They found safety blankets to keep their patient warm. Gingerly, they extracted Sanders's wallet and held it open before his eyes so he could see the pictures of his wife and daughters.

"I'm not going to make it," one of the youngsters heard Sanders say.

Aaron Hancey didn't give up.

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Madness. Terror. Malignancy. Cruelty. They all came visiting Tuesday at a school next to a spacious park in a well-off neighborhood at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

But also courage. Kindness. Selflessness. Endurance. The story of that catastrophe inside Columbine High is still sketchy, shadowy and confused. But by day's end yesterday, as snow clouds rolled gray over a grieving city, enough was known to understand that this story had heroes to go with its villains.

It is not known, for example, precisely when the mayhem began. There were reports Tuesday that a bomb exploded about a mile from the school a half-hour or so before the shooting broke out. But it wasn't clear whether the events were related. Other rumors swirled on Denver's television and talk radio stations, which were devoted entirely to the Columbine tragedy yesterday.

It is known, however, that at 11:30 a.m. it was fifth period at Columbine High School here. Littleton is not the wealthiest of Denver's suburbs, but it is a very desirable place to live, convenient to downtown, to the booming technology corridor south of the city, and to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. In this very good place there are some very good schools, none more attractive than Columbine High. It was a showplace when it opened a quarter-century ago, very progressive – it was a national pioneer in peer counseling, a program in which students volunteer to help other students through crises – and immediately distinguished itself in academics, music, drama and most of all athletics.

Earlier this year, Columbine students were surprised when kids at their arch-rival Chatfield High spread reports of serious gang troubles at Columbine. A joke went around school: Yeah, at Columbine our gangs beat you with their cellphones and run over you with BMWs.

It was a good time of year. Students were still talking about the previous weekend's prom. The first lunch shift was just starting. A number of students left campus for nearby fast-food joints. Throughout the school there were science experiments and choir practices and preparations for final exams.

Then, striding across a soccer field, closing on the student parking lots, came boys with guns and bombs. As they came closer, they began firing. An explosion racked a car on the parking lot. Everyone was baffled. Everyone was sure it was some kind of joke. Very quickly, as the blood began to run, everyone realized the truth.

There is an entrance to the building near the cafeteria, or commons, and it was through these doors that Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, entered, loaded up with an arsenal of almost unbelievable dimensions: two sawed-off shotguns, one rifle, a handgun and homemade grenades.

How many rounds of ammunition? "Very, very many," said Jefferson County Sheriff's Office spokesman Steve Davis yesterday. How many bombs? As many as 30, inside the building and out – grenades of six or eight inches in size, foot-long pipe bombs and, rigged to detonate at intervals, bombs made in empty propane bottles with a device attached to spray a deadly shower of nails as shrapnel.

County Sheriff John P. Stone raised and answered an obvious question. Did the killers smuggle caches of ammo and bombs into the school in advance? Or did they have ordnance-bearing accomplices? "That's a lot for two boys to carry," he said.

The answer is not known.

"Get down!" a custodian cried out, and students began to drop to the floor. "Crawl!" someone shouted, and a group of youngsters belly-crawled across the commons floor as others scattered – some into a laundry room with the cafeteria cooks, some into a nearby bathroom. Karen Nielsen, a cafeteria worker, thought of a nearby telephone and considered pulling it into the bathroom but realized that the snaking cord might draw the killers' attention.

A grenade went off in the middle of the commons. Perhaps another. When the belly-crawling youngsters reached a stairway they jumped to their feet and started running and the shots resumed. A young man fell wounded.

Officer Neil Gardner is the sheriff's deputy assigned to work each day at Columbine – there is one armed deputy in each of Jefferson County's high schools, not for any particular reason, according to spokesman Davis, just the times we live in. Gardner heard a war erupt in his school and drew his pistol and charged in the direction of the noise. In a corridor near the commons he encountered one of the gunmen and they started firing at each other. Neither was hit.

Gardner retreated to call for reinforcements, but already the 911 dispatcher was calling all cars. Two more deputies arrived within minutes and charged into the building. More shots were exchanged.

By now, Harris and Klebold were moving out of the commons and up the stairs, where they left at least two victims dying. On the second floor, they entered the library where Crystal Woodman, 16, among others, was cowering in the scant cover

of a library desk. From her hiding place she could hear her classmates joyfully turning the library into a charnel house.

"They'd shoot people and yell, they were excited," she said yesterday. "They said, 'We've waited to do this our whole lives.'," One saw a boy under a desk and cried, "peekaboo!" before opening fire.

Beside Woodman was Seth Houy, who curled his body around hers and whispered that he would take the bullet.

When Harris and Klebold stopped to reload, Woodman and Houy ran for their lives.

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The shooting lasted for about an hour. The gunmen stalked the halls. They exploded bombs that made the building tremble as if it would collapse. They laughed together. They set off flares, and when the fire alarm began ringing, one of them shot the alarm.

They fired from the windows of the school, spraying broken glass shards over a group of students huddling behind a car on the parking lot. One saw two kids running for their lives beyond a window and began pumping shotgun shells. Perhaps you've seen this in the movies – the windows collapsing like waterfalls one by one as the shooter tracks the target. Unlike the movies, the bullets did not vanish into the air. One kid was hit.

Yesterday in Denver there were questions about what the police – hundreds and hundreds of them gathering from all over town – were doing as this rampage wore on. The first SWAT team entered the building within 20 minutes of the first shot, sheriff's spokesman Davis said in defense. "But there were 2,000 students at that school, which covers about an acre. There was no way to identify with certainty the suspects. The team went slowly and methodically, with the first priority being the victims."

The police could not be sure what they were up against. At one point, they saw a sign in the shot-out window of the library: "Help, I'm bleeding to death," it said plaintively. And then there was a boy at the window, so far identified only as "Rich," bloody, ashen and looking as if he might jump. The Lakewood Police Department SWAT team moved an armored car beneath the window and two officers put down their guns, climbed up on the car and reached toward the window, toward the possible ambush.

Heroism? "Absolutely," said the team leader, Sgt. George Hinkle. The boy survived surgery at Swedish Hospital in Denver. "From what we know, he was the last survivor from the carnage," Hinkle said.

In all, four SWAT teams were in the building by 1 p.m., going slowly, slowly, room by room. By now the shooting had stopped. But the police did not know exactly what that meant.

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Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold apparently shot themselves to death, adding their bodies to the heap of broken youth in the high school library – by a terrible measure the center of the killing. It is not yet known just when they died.

Because the police did not know precisely where the killers were, or how many of them might be in the building, much less that they were dead, their progress through Columbine High School was painstaking.

In an airless storage room off the auditorium, a mass of kids, including Aaron Hancey's twin brother, Adam, sweated and moaned and waited for help. Other youngsters tried crawling through the school's ventilation shafts to safety.

And on the red-stained linoleum floor of a science classroom, Aaron Hancey and his fellow students kept pressing their shirts into Dave Sanders's shoulders. He spoke constantly to the teacher, leaning close and whispering: "You're doing all right. They're coming. Just hold on. You can do it."

"Tell my girls I love them," Sanders breathed.

Three hours passed this way.

Then Aaron Hancey looked up to see a heavily armed and armored officer slide through the doorway. "Be quiet. Put your hands on your heads and follow us out," he barked.

Aaron Hancey offered to stay with Dave Sanders. "We've got to get everyone out," the policeman repeated.

Sometime after the boy left – it is not known precisely when – Dave Sanders joined the dead.

*Staff writer Tom Kenworthy contributed to this report.*