

Apology to Rachel's kin 'from the heart'

By [Kevin Simpson](#)
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April 21 - A year ago, he lay wounded and paralyzed next to Rachel Scott, unable to help her as a gunman taunted his classmate and friend about her faith in God - and then killed her.

On Thursday, he struggled to set things right.

In a touching speech directed to Rachel's family, Richard Castaldo departed from his planned remarks at a memorial service and spoke from the heart, delivering what amounted to an apology for not being able to recall Rachel's final moments.

"This is probably one of the hardest... " Castaldo began, and then he choked back sobs.

"People tell me I said she said she believed in God, and I can't remember it," Castaldo said a few moments later, his voice breaking.

"Somehow, I know she did the right thing in the end." Castaldo's mother, Connie Michalik, says her son described Rachel's final moments shortly after coming out of surgery at Swedish Medical Center. But since then, his memory has faded until he is no longer sure what happened.

The 18-year-old Castaldo has carried a double burden since April 20, his mother said. He felt guilt he couldn't intervene, and frustration he can no longer remember if Rachel professed her faith to her killer - an exchange that would confirm what some have described as martyrdom.

"After he got the breathing tube out, he was crying and upset, telling me through sobs how they taunted and teased her about God," Michalik said. "Then he heard a shot and he didn't know what happened to her.

"He asked me again this morning: 'What did I say? Why didn't anybody write it down?' He's asked me so many times. Richard has cried a thousand tears for Rachel. He has so much guilt inside."

Michalik says that while Richard didn't hear Rachel's response to the gunman's taunts about God, she gathered from her son's account that Rachel probably did profess her faith. As many as three students reportedly responded to such questioning from the killers.

Castaldo, a young man of few words, surprised his mother by immediately accepting an invitation from Darrell Scott, Rachel's father, to speak at Thursday's Columbine Redemption event.

"Darrell called on Monday to invite us and asked if Richard would want to say something," Michalik said. "He immediately said yes. I was shocked." Castaldo said his girlfriend helped him outline his remarks Wednesday night. But while he carried a scrap of note paper scribbled with ideas, he immediately departed from the script when it came time for him to speak.

"I was just going to say what a great person Rachel was," Castaldo said after the service.

"What he said was better," said Craig Michalik, Richard's stepfather. "What was said was from the heart."

Darrell Scott couldn't have agreed more. "I think he's a great young man. I don't want him to feel any pressure from us. We have closure in Rachel's life and death. I never focus on her last words as being a major issue in her life."