

How The Shootings Of Cassie Bernall And Valeen Schnurr Fueled One Of Columbine's Biggest Myths

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Cassie Bernall was supposedly killed at Columbine for refusing to renounce God, but she had actually been mistaken for fellow student Valeen Schnurr.



Wikimedia Cassie Bernall

The Columbine High School massacre of 1999 sent shockwaves across America and forced an entire nation to try to wrestle with unanswerable questions. How could two teenage boys commit such horrific acts of violence? Where did we go wrong? Is the world a chaotic pit with no fundamental meaning, or God-given direction?

The grieving country desperately tried to find answers, and for a while, found one in Cassie Bernall.

Cassie Bernall was 17 when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold gunned her down during the massacre at Columbine High. As the studious daughter of a religious mother, Misty Bernall, the young woman became a sort of martyr when a student witness named Emily Wyant claimed that Bernall had refused to reject God during the shootings, causing Klebold to kill her. So there it was: These troubled boys could at least be filed as “anti-religion” and we could all feel like we understood them to some degree.

In reality, however, Cassie Bernall was killed without any such prologue — which Wyant only finally revealed more than 10 years later. In the meantime, the myth gained so much traction that outlets like *Salon* and *Rocky Mountain News* as well as Misty Bernall’s book, *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* captivated a nation.



Public Domain Valeen Schnurr

As is the case with any myth, however, there was a semblance of truth to the tale. A girl did get shot and did profess her religious faith to Dylan Klebold, but she didn’t die as a result. And her name wasn’t Cassie Bernall, it was Valeen Schnurr.

The Shootings Of Cassie Bernall And Valeen Schnurr



[Wikimedia Commons Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold in the Columbine cafeteria during the shooting on April 20, 1999](#)

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold — two friends who bonded over violent video games, guns, and Nazi iconography — walked into Columbine High School prepared to immortalize themselves in the history books. Their plan was to kill more people than Timothy McVeigh did in the Oklahoma City bombing, and they too were planning to do so with explosives.

When the two 20-pound propane bombs failed to explode, however, Harris and Klebold had to reassess, *CNN* wrote. They initially wanted to pick off students when the explosions forced panicked hordes to run into the parking lot, but this was no longer an option. Instead, the Columbine shooting, as we know it, took shape.

The two students once again entered the school, and this time, officially commenced killing. Klebold eventually found his way into Cassie Bernall and Valeen Schnurr's classroom. These two girls would eventually be confused for one another by a third student, and lead to one of the most factually incorrect yet widely recounted episodes of the Columbine shooting.

Klebold eventually focused his indiscriminate shooting spree on Schnurr. He fired his shotgun at the girl, who then lay on the ground pleading for

God as the shooter walked away. When he heard her crying for help, however, he returned.

“God?” Klebold asked her. “Do you believe in God?” According to Wyant, Valeen Schnurr hesitated for a brief moment before responding: “Yes. I believe in God.” Klebold asked her why, to which Schnurr plainly replied: “Because I believe. And my parents brought me up that way.”

The shooter reloaded as Valeen Schnurr attempted to crawl away. Miraculously, though she was bleeding out of 34 separate wounds, she pulled through and was transported to a local hospital for surgery following the massacre.

Valeen Schnurr lived to tell the tale, but a boy named Craig — in the adrenaline-fueled mayhem — confused Valeen Schnurr for Cassie Bernall. Bernall, unfortunately, had been hiding in the same room and died that afternoon.



Hyoungh Chang/The Denver Post via Getty Images Cassie's brother, Chris, at the Columbine two-year anniversary at Clement Park, April 20, 2001.

Though Bernall was praying quietly for Klebold not to discover her, he eventually did. He poked his shotgun under the table — and said, “Peekaboo” — before he shot her in the head.

There was no moment of defiance, no storybook bravery that circulated in the media, and likely not even a moment for Bernall to realize what was about to happen when she was killed. The myth merely sprang up because a boy named Craig confused two girls in the middle of a school shooting.

The Myth Of Cassie Bernall



Mark Leffingwell/Getty ImagesA pump action shotgun and assault rifle used in the shooting, on display at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds, Feb. 26, 2004.

The narratives that Cassie Bernall was either targeted for her religious devotion or that she died as a martyr by stoically remaining steadfast before being gunned down wasn't sinister in nature.

The story was spread less for the sake of intentional Christian propaganda (though this was certainly a factor regarding Misty Bernall's book, or Rick Santorum's bizarre decision to use the story as a campaign tool).

In the end, Cassie Bernall's mythologized sainthood was an act of unintentional, warranted desperation. The parents of Columbine students had just experienced one of the worst disasters in American history and tried strenuously to make sense of it. Parents, church leaders, and politicians alike all flocked to Cassie Bernall's story of faithful defiance — with some employing it more opportunistically than others.



Craig F. Walker/The Denver Post via Getty ImagesBrad and Misty Bernal pose at West Bowles Community Church after an interview with *The Denver Post*. 1999.

Years later, when the truth of Cassie Bernal and Valeen Schnurr's experiences had been corrected, devoted followers of the initial, false version of events still remained. For many, this heroic tale of standing up to bullying and nihilistic violence was simply more important than the facts — because it gave them the slightest semblance of reason or purpose.

In that sense, the sanctifying of Cassie Bernal's actions, mistaken for Valeen Schnurr's, made all the sense in the world.