

# Echoes of Columbine

By Rita Healy Wednesday, Apr. 18, 2007



Larry W. Smith / Getty

A memorial for the twelve students and one teacher killed at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999.

For Cho Seung-Hui, Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were "martyrs." In a video Cho sent to NBC on Monday, the day he shot 32 students and professors at Virginia Tech before taking his own life, Cho glorified Klebold and Harris, leaving many to wonder if Cho was mimicking the attack at the Littleton, Colo., high school, which occurred eight years ago Friday.

Even before Cho's own words became public, the Virginia Tech killings was stirring up memories for Columbine survivors. One teacher and 12 students were killed that day, along with Klebold and Harris. Another 24 kids were injured — shot in the face, spinal column, abdomen, neck, arms, legs or hands. They have made varying degrees of recovery; some are still in wheelchairs. One mother of an injured student committed suicide six months later.

On the week of the Virginia Tech tragedy, TIME sought out some of the survivors of Columbine, to see how they have coped and to find out what connections they see between Monday's shooting and their own nightmare eight years ago.

Makai Hall, now 24, was in the Columbine High School library when Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, went on their shooting rampage April 20, 1999. He suffered a bullet wound in his right knee and shrapnel in his torso and cheek. His scars remain visible.

"My heart goes out to the people at Virginia Tech," he says. "It's an incredible thing to go through. For me, the healing process will always go on. When I saw the candlelight service on television, it so reminded me of how the Littleton community reacted, and I'd say, 'Hold on to that.' That's what helped me get better, that the community was there for us and everyone cared and wanted to help."

Following the shootings, Hall spent three days in a hospital and a month on crutches. Through a victim's advocate, he found counseling. He was having trouble with nightmares, survivor's guilt and "a fear of people in general." His therapy lasted about six months.

After high school he drifted from college to college: a semester at Ft. Lewis College in Durango, two years at Arapaho Community College, a semester at CU-Denver. Today he lives in Hawaii and works as a carpenter. If people ask about his scars, he might tell about his Columbine experience. "But I generally keep it to myself."

He says he doesn't think of Columbine too often, and generally feels healthy. "I feel good. I'm happy. It's been a while since I could say that, but about two years ago I started feeling better — not before that."

He knew Dylan Klebold from French class. He says he has forgiven both Klebold and Harris. "They're the only ones I could blame, and I view them as sick people."

He isn't especially tuned in to the Columbine-Littleton community these days. But when he heard the news about Virginia Tech, he says, he felt a strong compulsion to reach out. His mother suggested that he blog something on the Internet, which he intends to do.

In the meantime, a reporter's call helped. "Maybe I needed to talk," he says. "I really wasn't having such a great day today. Thank you."

For 7 1/2 minutes Crystal Woodman-Miller hid under a table in the library during Klebold and Harris's rampage. A 16-year-old junior intent upon becoming an elementary school teacher, Woodman-Miller was spared death or injury along with two other students under the table, she now believes, because the shooters ran out of ammunition before they got to her group.

She remembers the aftermath of the massacre as a blur of media attention, memorial services and funerals. "It took a long time to be able to laugh or even smile without feeling guilty," she tells TIME.

After Columbine, her intense grief lasted at least two months. She couldn't stand to be touched. She only wanted to be with fellow students who had undergone the same experiences. She could think of little else.

Then she began individual therapy with a psychologist specializing in trauma counseling. A number of specialists moved into Littleton following the shootings, but through her church Crystal was able to find one who was already a member of the community. For four or five years she saw her therapist as often as she could, usually weekly.

"Every single night for two years there was some kind of violent dream," she says. She dreaded going to bed because she knew the dreams were awaiting. She also felt survivor's guilt. "In some ways, I wished I'd been killed that day."

But she relied on her faith and returned to Columbine that fall for her senior year, becoming a peer counselor. When she enrolled in college, she initially pursued her ambition to teach. But soon she decided that she could make a difference among young people in another way, and became a speaker and author. In her book *Marked for Life*, she writes about how Columbine became a pivotal point in her life, and she has been invited to speak at schools around the world about the tragedy.

On April 20, 1999 Richard Castaldo, then 17, was eating lunch on the lawn with Rachel Scott when Harris and Klebold attacked. They killed her and shot him in the arm, chest, back and abdomen, damaging his lungs, kidney and spleen. A spinal cord injury will confine him to a wheelchair for life.

Three weeks ago Castaldo moved from Colorado to Los Angeles. "He has a brand-new life," says his mother, Connie Michalik. "He really needed to get away from Denver."

In Los Angeles, Castaldo goes to audio engineering school. He has a service dog and lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment, although there are relatives nearby. Watching television coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings, he saw Craig Scott, Rachel's brother, on TV talking about Columbine. The Virginia massacre stirred up painful memories. "It's horrible, obviously; it's overwhelming," he says. "It makes me wonder why things like that happen."

Castaldo has never come to grips with why the Columbine shootings happened. It's something only the shooters could know, he says. His own rehabilitation was focused on his body; he had no mental

health counseling, although he says he suffered "a little bit" from nightmares, survivor's guilt and fear of people. "Early on," he adds, "not so much anymore."

To those in Virginia who are seriously injured he has this advice: "Try to focus on more positive things, if you can." There are spiritual resources, he adds, even for someone who says, "I'm not the most religious person in the world." He calls it "finding a spiritual calm."

"You've got to take time out of your day. It sounds corny, but looking at the sky and the stars helps put things in perspective."

Does he feel healed?

"It's never going to be completely as it was before. But I'm probably as healed now as I'm going to get."