

Tragedy, truth - and Hope

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The Scotsman

WHEN I turned on my television on April 20, 1999, and watched SWAT teams with shields crouching near entrances to a school, kids on gurneys being lifted into ambulances, and parents frantically searching for loved ones, I, like the rest of the world, was shocked, confused and disturbed.

At Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, Eric Harris, 18 and Dylan Klebold, 17, shot and killed 12 classmates and a teacher, before killing themselves. Littleton is a serene, suburban community near Denver, nestled in the Rocky Mountains, not unlike the community I grew up in myself. The events felt like something of a personal wake up call. Questions kept racing through my mind. What was happening in my country? Where were the parents? How could children acquire all these guns and bombs? Are we failing today's youth? Can I do anything to prevent this from happening again?

I had an odd, almost immediate, instinct to talk to the people directly affected by this tragedy. So, without any credentials other than being an American citizen, I decided I would go to Colorado. As an actress, my instinct was to create a documentary style play but I was not sure how I should, and could, go about it. Perhaps hearing the voices of those who survived this ordeal would humanise it for the rest of us. Maybe bringing their voices to an audience would raise awareness of an unprecedented problem.

Unwilling to impose on the community's grieving process, I waited six months before flying to Littleton. Using the yellow pages, I found the families whose names I had seen in press cuttings and picked up the phone. I simply told them I was writing a documentary play and was keen to speak to them about their experience. To my surprise people were open to talking to me.

My first interview was with Tom Mauser, the father of Daniel Mauser, one of the victims. As we sat eating salad together, he spoke of how his life had changed in the six months since his son's death. Tom was about to take a job with SAFE (Sane Alternative to the Firearms Epidemic) to work on gun-control legislation in Colorado before his son's death. Tom recalled how, just two weeks before his death, Daniel and he had discussed laws for assault weapons over dinner. Tom spent some time talking about Daniel and the incident for me and, as he spoke, I realised for the first time that I might just be in over my head. Was it wrong for me to ask people in this community to speak about something so painful, and to me? Could I handle hearing their stories? This was my first interview and already I felt shaken.

Brian Rohrbough, father of victim Daniel Rohrbough, presented a very different response. He was filled with rage, and beneath the anger there was intense pain. The press had printed a picture of Daniel's body lying on the pavement. The body had been left there for 27 hours.

Speaking at great length about the police, Brian felt they were still covering up information, that they had made too many mistakes. He intended to sue the police for not taking quick enough action at the school.

He then told me that Eric Harris had previously made a death threat against another child in the community, and that the police had not informed the parents. Brian added that he had reason to believe that the third and final shot that killed Daniel may have been fired by a police officer. A police deputy from the town that I interviewed later said that while the police were being blamed for many things related to the shootings, people in the community simply did not understand police and SWAT protocol.

Brian put me in touch with his ex-wife, and Daniel's mother, Sue Petrone. Sue and her new husband Rich spoke to me at their home for several hours about her son. Afterwards, she took me outside and showed me a swing that Daniel had enjoyed sitting on. Underneath was the section of the sidewalk on which Daniel had been shot and killed. Sue had asked the school to bring that piece of sidewalk to her house and had set it up in her backyard. She said it gave her some peace to have a part of him with her.

Daniel Rohrbough's friend Lance Kirklin was shot just after Daniel. Eric Harris shot Lance in one leg and in the face, blowing his jaw apart. When I met him I was surprised at how well he looked. He was about to have his sixth surgery to reconstruct his jaw, using parts of his leg bone for the process. Lance did not hate Eric Harris for shooting him and was very matter-of-fact when he recounted being shot - almost at peace with it. In contrast, I struggled to believe what I was hearing. It was difficult to listen to a boy calmly speak of seeing one friend killed and another paralysed by a bullet and not react in horror. Lance had been through so much at such a young age, yet still had a charming sense of humour. He was also looking forward to being able to go hunting with his dad very soon.

Nothing, however, could have prepared me for meeting Devon Adams. Devon had been friends with Dylan Klebold at Columbine. Her friend, Rachel Scott, was one of Dylan's victims. Devon explained that being a friend of Dylan's has caused her to lose friends after the shootings. Some of the students could not understand why she wanted to put up a memorial tile in the hallway for Dylan. How could she forgive him? Somehow she was able to. Unlike the American media, which had often portrayed Klebold and Harris as "The Monsters Next Door", Devon forced me to think about them in a different way, as victims too, a point of view that incensed Brian Rohrbough.

The boys Devon had known were two flawed human beings, who had been capable of making better choices, but had lost their way and "just blew it". She has made several trips to high schools in different parts of America to talk about her experiences. At the end of her talks she makes sure to say: "Look to the person to your left. And now to your right. Imagine they're not here tomorrow."

Pastor Gino Geraci was on the scene that day, providing counsel for the police officers. He spoke about the separation of Church and State in America leading to a lack of spirituality, a void of belief in something higher than ourselves.

"We have taught these children that they come from nowhere, and that's where they're going," he said. I had never thought of spirituality in schools as an issue. It is now at the very heart of my play *A Line in the Sand*.

After seven trips to Colorado over the course of a year, 60 interviews, and hundreds of pages of transcript, I faced the task of focusing these voices into an hour-long play. I could have written 20 plays with the material I had. The 19 people who have ended up in the script were chosen for their specific words, their connection to the questions I am exploring, but primarily because I could not get them out of my head or my heart.

All of the people I spoke with blessed me with their openness and their generosity. They opened their homes to me, shared their experiences, their pain, and their hopes for the future. I found in them great courage, strength, and hope.