

HAIL OF BULLETS CUTS SHORT THE PROMISE OF STUDENTS' LIVES

Judith Graham and V. Dion Haynes

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

APRIL 23, 1999

The Jefferson County coroner's office Thursday released a list of the 15 fatalities at Columbine High School as residents of this Denver suburb prepared to say their final farewells to the victims.

Rachel Scott was among the 13 victims of the shooting rampage, after which the two student gunmen killed themselves. She was a dark-haired, 17-year-old who played the lead last month in the school play, "Smoke in the Room." Her funeral is planned for Saturday.

Scott's car, a red Acura, still sits in the parking lot at the school, a pair of white sneakers carelessly flung behind the driver's seat and a pair of purple mittens on the floor.

Friends have covered the car with flowers and notes, and a floppy, tan stuffed dog lies draped over the cracked driver's side mirror. A green-and-white canopy was erected over the car Thursday to preserve the growing pile of mementos from the heavy snows that blanketed the Denver area.

Lorre Gibson, whose daughter Layne was a classmate of Scott, will be going to Scott's funeral with her two daughters, she said as she looked quietly at the slain girl's car. Layne just happened to go home for lunch Tuesday or she also would have been in the cafeteria when the shooting began, Gibson said.

"I don't think there are ugly enough words to describe what happened here this week. In one second, these children lost their innocence. This will be the defining moment of their high school years," she said.

Many of those killed were just starting on those years:

- Steve Curnow, a 14-year-old freshman who loved "Star Wars," had dreamed of becoming a top gun in the Navy and flying F-16 fighter jets.

- Daniel Mauser, 15, a bespectacled sophomore, got straight A's on his last two report cards and had just returned from a two-week trip to Paris with the school's French club.

- Kelly Fleming, 16, had moved to Littleton from Phoenix 18 months ago. An aspiring songwriter, she was learning to play the guitar.

On Thursday, Matt Katzenmeir, a strapping 15-year-old sophomore, came to Clement Park to remember two friends he had lost in the shootings: Matt Kechter, 16, and Isaiah Shoels, 18.

Katzenmeir had known Kechter since they were in kindergarten. "He was the nicest kid on Earth," he said. "I saw Matt that day. I was planning to go to the library to type a report, and Matt was going to help."

Katzenmeir got to know Shoels just last year, he said. "He was so kind. . . . My cousin said she saw a bullet go in his head and come out," he said, pausing to compose himself.

Shoels had overcome two heart surgeries, became a weightlifter and was due to graduate in May.

So was Lauren Townsend, 18. She was captain of the girls varsity volleyball team, which her mother coaches, a member of the National Honor Society and favored to become class valedictorian.

Many survivors are struggling to cope with their escape, counselors said Thursday. With all of the talk of heroes, they say, many children are consumed with the thought that they might have done something to prevent a death.

"The reality is that these kids were running for their lives. There was not a lot they could have done," said Kate Murphy, one of four volunteer counselors.

Among the other victims were Cassie Bernall, 17, an accomplished equestrian, and Corey DePooter, also 17, who held a maintenance job at a golf club to save up for a boat.

Another victim, Daniel Rohrbough, 15, helped out in his father's electronics business and enjoyed computer games. He reportedly was shot while holding open an exit door for fleeing students.

Also killed was John Tomlin, 16, who recently completed a missionary trip to Mexico with his family, where they built homes for the poor. He planned to enlist in the Army after high school.

The only adult victim, Dave Sanders, was a popular coach for the girls basketball and softball teams. A father of four and a grandfather, Sanders, 47, died when he tried to help students escape the shooting. On Thursday, a basketball inscribed to him was among the mementos left in Clement Park, near the school.

Fourteen victims remain in area hospitals, three of them in critical condition. One is Anne Marie Hochhalter, 17, who is on a ventilator with gunshot wounds to her chest and liver.

Friends waited anxiously Thursday outside her room at Swedish Medical Center, including her best friend, Patti Blair, also a junior. Hochhalter cannot speak but has been able to write notes to family and friends. In one, she asked about two friends who had pulled her to safety after she was shot, said her physician, Dr. Phil Mallory.

Hochhalter, outside the school when the gunmen approached, apparently was among the first to be shot.

"She's strong. She'll get through this," said Blair, who has a lot to deal with on her own. She was in the school library, where the two gunmen wrought the worst of their devastation.

She said the gunmen saw her and a friend hiding behind a table, then moved beyond them and shot other students.

"We don't know why they left us," Blair said. "They were shooting people everywhere and throwing pipe bombs. They kicked a guy, asked him what was funny and then shot him in the head. He jolted, and then they shot him again," she said.

Also in the hospital, Richard Castaldo, 17, was in surgery to stabilize a spinal fracture. He also had been outside the school when the gunmen started shooting.

On Thursday, his breathing tube was removed, and his father, Rick, said he is "optimistic" about his son's recovery.

The 15th body was identified by police only as that of Kyle Velasquez. They released no details.