

At the funeral for Isaiah Shoels, his mother, Vonda, gives her son a farewell kiss as Isaiah's father, Michael Shoels, looks on. Nearly 7,000 mourners packed Denver's Heritage Christian Center (opposite page) to celebrate the life of the popular young man (inset). Members of the Columbine High School football team (opposite page, below) served as pallbearers.

Requiem For A High School

Brutal slaying of ISAAH SHOELS at a Colorado high school stuns a nation already chilled by rash of savage attacks against Blacks

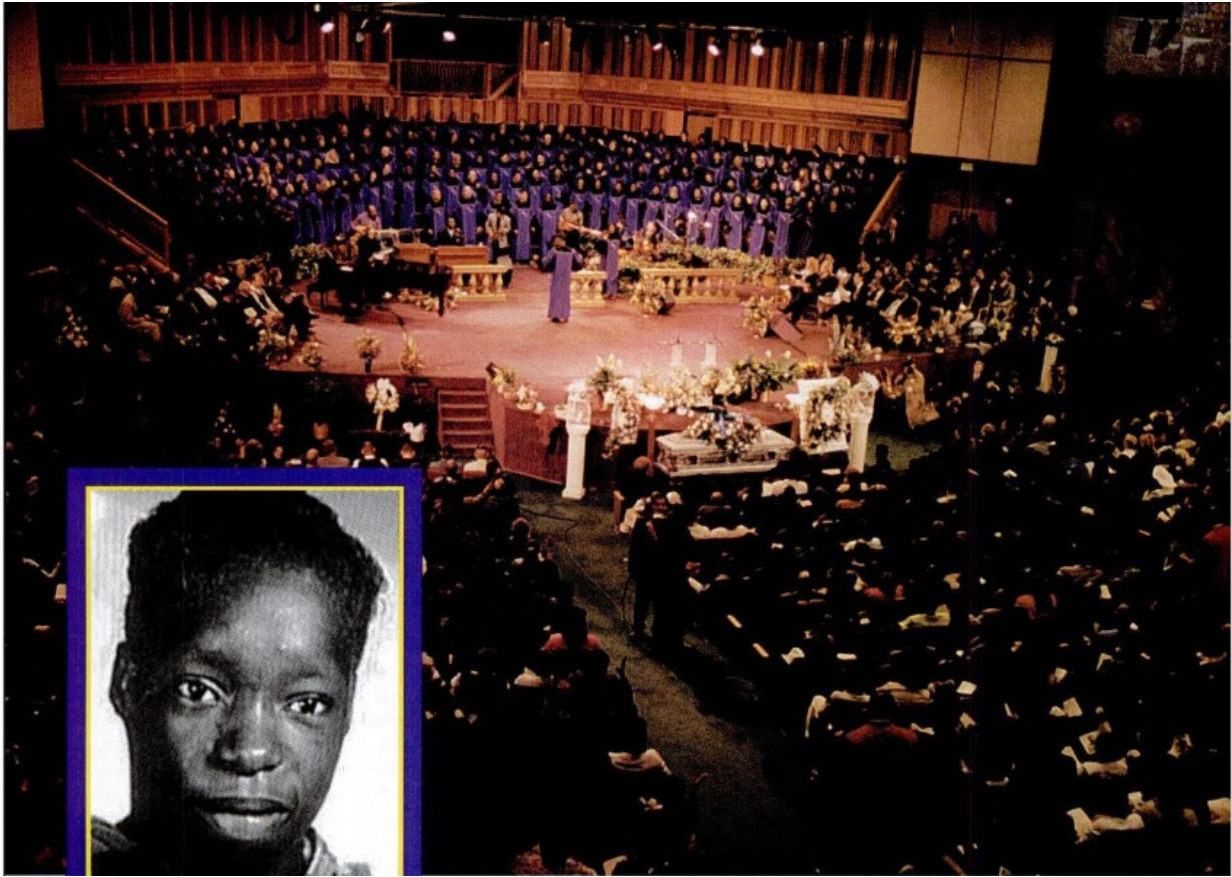
MORE than 2,500 cars ringed Denver's Heritage Christian Center, a gleaming, shopping mall-sized religious complex situated on the eastern fringe of the city. Sedans, limousines, sport utility vehicles and trucks carrying hordes of media crews spilled out of the parking lot and onto the surrounding streets, as mourners in the Mile High City queued up in droves to pay their final respects to Isaiah Shoels, the 18-year-old, 4-foot-11-inch football player whose skin color, popularity and athletic prowess brought upon him the scorn of the two classmates who hunted him

down and shot him to death in the library of his suburban high school.

Moved by the staggering brutality of the April 20 massacre at Columbine High School, where Shoels, 11 of his classmates and one teacher were killed, nearly 7,000 people ventured out on a damp and dreary Denver Thursday to extend comforting hands and words to the Shoels family and to denounce the culture of violence and hatred that fueled the melee in Littleton, Colo., an affluent bedroom community few imagined would ever be the scene of such a vicious slaughter.

The entire nation recoiled in horror

as the details of the Columbine melee were revealed by its survivors. Most staggering was the calculated and cold-blooded manner in which Isaiah Shoels was gunned down. During their rampage, his killers, 18-year-old Eric Harris and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold, a pair of right-wing, Hitler-loving extremists, had scoured the school looking for Shoels, one of only a handful of Blacks enrolled at Columbine, a school of more than 1,900 students. Finding Shoels crouched under a table in the library, witnesses reported that one of the murderers shouted "there's that little n---r," before shooting Shoels in the



Martyr

face at point-blank range with a TEC-9 semiautomatic handgun.

After taking the lives of 12 students and a teacher and wounding 23 others, the two gunmen—who police believe planned their deadly mission for nearly a year—committed suicide.

“Most Americans were saddened by what happened at Columbine,” said Martin Luther King III, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and one of several nationally known civic and religious leaders invited to speak at the three-and-a-half-hour ceremony celebrating the life of Isaiah Shoels. “But we should not be shocked, for we knew that America had sown the seeds of violence and our children are reaping the fruits of that violence.”

Isaiah Shoels’ murder sent another tremor down the collective spines of African-Americans still processing the





Speakers at the memorial service for Isaiah Shoels included Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, SCLC President Martin Luther King III, Colorado Secretary of State Vikki Buckley, the Rev. Issaih Carter, who delivered the eulogy, and Frank DeAngelis, principal of Columbine High School. Below, Michael Shoels, father of the slain teen (center), met with Denver Mayor Wellington Webb (r.) and Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings (l.) at the National Conference of Black Mayors.

REQUIEM *Continued*

savageness of a spate of recent attacks and the proliferation of right-wing racist groups. High-profile killings such as the shooting death of Amadou Diallo, the unarmed Nigerian émigré who was gunned down in his vestibule by New York police officers, and the 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr., the Jasper, Texas, man who was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to death, have led many to wonder whether the new millennium marks the beginning of open season on Black folks.

More than a week after the Columbine shootings, there was still disbelief that a racially motivated murder had occurred in a region of the country where a Black mayor leads the major city and African-Americans hold the posts of lieutenant governor and secretary of state. The grief registered on the faces of mourners who poured into the church for Isaiah Shoels' funeral. Eyes rimmed with tears, shoulders hunched in anguish, they filed solemnly past the metallic-blue casket where Isaiah Shoels—clad in a black graduation cap and gown, the diploma he

would have earned propped beside him—lay in state. The crowd not only filled the 3,500-seat Heritage Christian Center sanctuary and its adjacent gymnasium—outfitted with television monitors to broadcast the proceedings—but the overflow flooded the church corridors, where the grief-stricken hugged and cried and even laughed to ease the pain.

It seemed that everyone in the Denver metropolitan area was there:

White and Black, young and old, students, teachers, politicians, ministers, friends of Isaiah Shoels and people who never met the charismatic young man.

"I didn't have the privilege of knowing Isaiah," said Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, "and I don't think there are any words that somebody like me can say that will ease the pain of the family and friends of Isaiah and the other children that have been so brutally murdered. But I do know that we have to resolve today to do everything we can, no matter what our color, no matter what our religion, no matter what school we go to, no matter what we have done in the past, that we do what we can to try to say no more."

And so the people of Colorado came together—under the gaze of a nation watching the proceedings on cable television—to make sense of a senseless way and to begin the healing process. But most of all, they came together to celebrate the brief but shining life of a young man described by friends and family as a "people magnet."

"Isaiah touched so many of our lives," said Columbine High School Principal Frank DeAngelis. "He brought joy and pleasure to so many of his classmates and teachers."

"People just wanted to be around Isaiah," said Tim Capra, a teacher at the school. "You couldn't be in his presence





At the gravesite, mourners and members of the Shoels family listen to a final eulogy. Seated are (l. to r.) Michael and Vonda Shoels, grandparents Bessie and Joseph Harris, and sisters Melissa and Michelle Shoels. Below, Vonda and Michael Shoels sprinkle rose petals on the casket prior to the descent into Isaiah Shoels' final resting place.

REQUIEM *Continued*

and not want to smile."

From the beginning, it appeared that Isaiah Emon Shoels was destined to make an impression on the world. The second of Vonda and Michael Shoels' five children, he was born with a congenital heart defect. He made headlines when, at 7 months old, he became one of the youngest patients in the nation to survive open-heart surgery.

Though small in stature, he was gregarious and athletic. "He was a natural leader," his father said. "Everyone who knew Isaiah loved him. He wouldn't let his size or illness stop him from going out and trying his best at anything."

He was tremendously resilient, despite a childhood wracked by illness. Just two weeks before he was murdered, he'd spent several days in intensive care following another bout with the heart ailment he'd battled since

birth. Having survived that ordeal, his parents thought their "little warrior" was practically invincible.

"I've said that he came in with his boots strapped on and ready to go," Michael Shoels said. "That's really the only way to describe him. He was a big-hearted kid."

Isaiah had played football since junior high and joined the weight lifting team at Columbine, where he set records for lifting twice his 120-pound weight. His often-stated ambition was to become a music producer.

But the qualities that endeared Isaiah to many of his peers and teachers are the same ones that inflamed the rage and hatred of his killers, members of the school's so-called "Trench Coat Mafia," a group of outsiders who favored long, black, oil-skin coats and professed a hatred for minorities and athletes and a love for Adolf Hitler.

"They went after my son because he was an athlete and because he was

Black," Michael Shoels said. "We know that. We know that they went into the school looking specifically for him."

Isaiah Shoels was the lone Black fatality among the victims, and his was the last of the funerals held during the fortnight in which a nation tried to come to grips with the enormity of the tragedy.

Most of the speakers at Isaiah Shoels' "homegoing" called for healing and for an end to what Colorado Secretary of State Vikki Buckley termed the "new age hate crimes" stirred up by the plethora of Internet sites spewing racist propaganda and poisoning young minds.

And to a person, the speakers called for the end of the national love affair with violence. "I come today to challenge us to confess our sin as a nation for embracing and glorifying violence so much that it has become the very essence of our culture," said King, who urged participation in the SCLC's gun collection campaign.

But it was William Collins, Isaiah's grandfather, who sounded the note that resonated most with the mourners gathered to pay tribute to their slain classmate and friend, who in the wake of a tragedy had become a national symbol. "When does it stop?" he asked, referring to the epidemic of violence. "When does it end? I'm tired of laying to rest politicians, engineers, athletes, musicians, artists, preachers, janitors and sanitation haulers who were far from reaching their potential.

"When we are taught not to mingle, not to associate with, to stay on our side of the fence," he continued, "we become the fathers and mothers of hatred. I believe and I know, it is time to tear the fence down." □

