

Minorities are Columbine, too

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July 25 - As the mother of one of only 16 African-American students at Columbine High School, Tammy Theus waited in terror for six hours after hearing that a black youth was among those feared dead April 20 in the worst school shooting in U.S. history.

When she finally learned her son was safe, she grieved for his best friend, Isaiah Shoels, who was called a "nigger" by one of the gunmen before he was killed.

Theus reluctantly let her 15-year-old, Tyrone Garrett, return to classes. Then on June 2, the day students were allowed back into Columbine to pick up their belongings, she was stunned when she walked into a girls' bathroom.

Written in ink on a stall, Theus said, were the words, "I wonder why the niggers and Mexicans don't go back where they came from, the other side of the rock."

That's when she withdrew Tyrone from the school.

But Theus hasn't walked away from what she and a group of other parents of minority students at Columbine say are chronic problems that existed at the school - problems the school district is addressing - long before Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and a teacher.

"Columbine has always had this image of "We Are Columbine," said Theus, referring to the cheer that gained new emotional meaning after the shootings. But not everyone has felt included, she said.

"We're asking for a change in the school and the district so when other minorities come they don't have to feel unwelcome or feel that they aren't good enough or aren't smart enough," Theus said.

The letterhead for the parent group reads: "Concerned Columbine Minority Parents: We Are Columbine Too."

The parents say they no longer will put up with school officials who ignore hateful graffiti, hurtful or threatening remarks, harassment, intimidation and low expectations and lack of support from teachers.

And while their focus is on minority students, they want a climate that benefits all, they said. They note that Harris and Klebold laughed derisively as they killed students, targeting not just Shoels but "jocks," a boy with glasses whom they called a "nerd" and a girl who said yes, she believed in God.

Theus, who carried a cross in memory of that girl, Cassie Bernall, at this year's Juneteenth parade, said students and teachers "need to understand what diversity is all about."

Though it took the events of April 20 to bring together the minority parents' group and focus the media spotlight on school diversity issues, the Jefferson County School District actually began to address such problems following earlier racial incidents at Evergreen and Pomona high schools.

It created a districtwide diversity council, hired a diversity coordinator and began developing special teacher training programs. Now, as the backbone of its overall response to the Columbine tragedy, the district will require teachers to take a course in "Culturally Responsive Teaching." Teachers explore their own upbringing to better understand how cultural differences can affect how a student does in school.

"This is about creating a classroom where everyone is part of the community," said Deputy Superintendent Cindy Stevenson. "We want a climate that values diversity and diverse people. We want educational equity for all kids."

District officials and members of the minority parents' group say they are working together on solutions in meetings that began earlier this month. The parents are "very astute, very clear about the issues, really focused on how we make a better environment for these kids," Stevenson said.

Of 1,965 students enrolled at Columbine last year, 16 were black and 112 Hispanic. The Concerned Columbine Minority Parents report a range of issues centering on a lack of respect and low expectations for their children.

Last fall, for example, 17-year-old Crystal Archuleta struggled with some complex geometry problems. College was looming, and the junior didn't want an F in the course to mar her transcripts.

But when she asked the teacher for help, "She said I shouldn't worry about it because I'm a minority and colleges make exceptions for minorities," Archuleta said.

Archuleta's mother, Angie Amaro, met with the teacher, who told her the same thing: "She said, 'Mrs. Amaro, Crystal is Mexican, and she won't have any problems getting into college or getting money or grants.' I couldn't believe this was a teacher telling me this."

To the family, the remark reflected a teacher's negative stereotypes and low expectations. The teacher "was basically telling her that she could sit here all year long and not learn anything and she'd still be admitted to college," said Tony Amaro, Archuleta's stepfather.

He said the teacher dismissed Crystal's pleas for help with the suggestion she get private tutoring. The teacher offered help grudgingly, he said, only after a meeting with Principal Frank DeAngelis.

Amaro said minorities too often are steered into undemanding courses and then forced to take low-paying jobs because they lack needed skills. He wants more for his daughter.

"I made the commitment that my kids would not be field workers," he said. "I also don't want my kids taking shop while the Anglo kids take math and science and other subjects that will help them get ahead in life."

DeAngelis said he could not speak for the teacher, but he thought the matter had been resolved after the teacher agreed to help Archuleta.

But the complaint resurfaced when the Amaros met Deniece Norman and learned that her 15-year-old son, Justin, had problems with the same teacher. "He was getting D's and F's, and I didn't know about it until the sixth week grade period," said Norman, spokeswoman for the minority parents' group. "You'd think the teacher would have called up and said, 'Hey, your son is having problems.' When I called her, it took her two days to get back to me." The teacher could not be reached for comment.

The Columbine parents first met over a complaint they shared about a loudspeaker announcement the day students returned to classes after the shootings. Counselors were available to talk with students. According to the district, the intent was to allow "students of color" the option of meeting together if they wished. But some heard the term "colored students." Some parents didn't like the term "students of color," even if it was the term used, and objected to having their children singled out. District officials, who could not find a script of the actual announcement, plan to write letters of apology to the parents.

At that first meeting, the parents of minority students realized they shared other grievances. Norman's son, Justin, reported that graffiti was a problem all year, with swastikas and "white power" signs reappearing continually.

Archuleta also said graffiti was a problem at the school.

Deputy Superintendent Stevenson said she doesn't know how widespread the incidents of graffiti may be, but "I don't care if it occurs once or a hundred times, if it occurs at all we need to end it."

So far the parents' prodding has prompted the district to take steps to:

- Set up a hot line for students to report simmering problems without fear of retribution.
- Make sure racial slurs and other graffiti are promptly removed.

- Investigate records of the teacher accused of insensitive treatment of minority students.
- Make sure parents are aware when children are having academic problems.

The district also will strengthen staff efforts at all schools to intervene promptly and stop sexual or racial harassment, teasing, intimidation and any form of violence or cruelty, Stevenson said. "There is no room anymore for 'boys will be boys' or 'kids will be kids.' We want to be sure all classrooms and all hallways in all schools are safe environments."

Norman said she's happy with the district's response so far.

"I was very pleased," she said. "The point of all of this was to see what was going on because a lot of these things are insulting to minority kids."

Not all minorities at Columbine are critical of the school.

"Maybe I'm naive or am walking around with blinders on, but as far as I'm aware, every complaint or inquiry is addressed immediately," said Ivory Moore, an American history teacher who is the only African-American faculty member. He noted that the school administration has always supported Unity in Action, a diversity club he sponsors that tries to educate students through activities. Sergio Gonzales, Unity in Action's 17-year-old co-chairman, said graffiti was a recurring problem at Columbine last year, but the diversity problems don't differ from those at other schools.

Parent Lynn Whitfield praised the way DeAngelis dealt with a racial slur targeted at her 17-year-old daughter, Corrie.

She said Corrie, who will be a senior, was called a "nigger" during her freshman year. Whitfield said she reported the incident to DeAngelis and was happy with the response. The name-caller was suspended and both girls had to meet with a counselor for diversity and sensitivity training.

"Any time I've worked with DeAngelis, he's always been responsive," Whitfield said. She added, however, that "the teacher seemed to want to brush (the incident) under the rug. That happens at Columbine."

Whitfield learned of other racial incidents at the school from her daughter only after the shootings. "She didn't tell me some of the things that were happening. As a parent, I have to be at the school more frequently, talk to my daughter every day, make sure I'm aware of what is going on."

DeAngelis said he needs that kind of support. "We have to get students believing that if there is something they are concerned about, if there is something that is inappropriate, that hopefully they can go to someone to say, 'Here is a concern we have.' When something is brought to my attention, I'll deal with it immediately."

Whitfield wants her daughter to return to Columbine when classes resume next month, despite her negative experiences. "At least (school officials) are aware, and I think they will be more responsive than they have been in the past. I can't say that for other schools. Other schools may have the same problems and haven't dealt with it."

Norman's son, Justin, and the Amaros' daughter, Crystal, also will return. Tammy Theus said she is prepared to drive her son to Littleton High School this fall, but she can't help thinking about the sentiment she read on a Columbine bumper sticker in the weeks following the shootings: "Be a Part, not Apart." She liked the sentiment, but then crumpled the bumper sticker into a ball after she saw the racist graffiti.

Theus sometimes wonders if being a part of Columbine isn't what's best for her son, after all. Tyrone told her that since the shootings, he has more white friends than ever.

And if he wants to go back to Columbine when school starts? "I'll leave it up to him."