

Columbine Survivors Talk About the Wounds That Won't Heal

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WESTWORD

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Alisha Basore says her nightmares about Columbine stopped on the ten-year anniversary of the attack.

Anthony Camera

Time is the school in which we learn,

Time is the fire in which we burn.

—Delmore Schwartz, “Calmly We Walk Through This April’s Day”

After all these years, it’s still there, in the back of her mind, lurking. No matter how good things are going, it never quite goes away, this feeling that she should have died that day. And her brush with death is the first thing that strangers tend to

notice about her, like a limp or a disfigurement. Once they find out where she went to high school, that's all they want to talk about.

Were you there? Did you see what happened?

Yes, she was there.

Sometimes it feels like it happened yesterday. Other times it's as if it happened to someone else. She has told the story of that day so many times now that it doesn't even feel like it's her story anymore. It's just something she knows, something she might have picked up anywhere, a scrap of ancient history or pop trivia. I'll take American Mass Shootings for a thousand, Alex.

Were you there? Did you see *them*?

Hundreds of students weren't on campus that day. It was a warm, sunny morning, a respite between spring snowstorms and 4/20 to boot, a day made for ditching school. Amanda Stair, a fifteen-year-old sophomore at Columbine High School, was tempted to skip class that morning, too. But she had an appointment with a school counselor and didn't want to be rude.

She put on a T-shirt from Hot Topic emblazoned with "Can't sleep, clowns will eat me" and walked to school. She bought doughnuts from a vending machine, took a test in her biology class, worked on a project in art class, sat in on her Spanish class. At loose ends, she decided to go to the school library while waiting for her meeting with the counselor. She sat at a table in the back, near the windows and a glorious view of the mountains, and started reading the *Rocky Mountain News*. It was a quarter past eleven in the morning on April 20, 1999.

She had been there only a few minutes when she heard popping noises outside. She thought it was firecrackers, a senior prank. Seconds later, art teacher Patricia Nielson ran into the library and announced that there was someone with a gun in the school. Nielson, who'd already been grazed by a bullet fired from the west entrance, yelled for everyone to take cover.

“Under the table, kids!” she screamed, while on the phone with a 911 dispatcher.
“Heads under the table!”

Stair ducked under her table. But she felt too exposed there, so she quickly crawled to a larger computer table with more side panels. She slipped into a cubbyhole and made herself as small as she could, pulling her knees up to her chest.

Then Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold burst into the library, armed with shotguns, a carbine, a semi-automatic pistol, knives and pipe bombs. “Everyone get up right now,” one of them barked, “or we’re going to blow your fucking heads off!”

No one stood up.

Harris and Klebold had already killed two people outside the school and badly wounded several others, including teacher Dave Sanders, who died from his injuries hours later while awaiting police aid. In the library, over the course of eight minutes, the gunmen killed ten more students. They taunted and mocked their victims, quizzed them about whether they believed in God, shot kids at point-blank range and then told them to quit their bitching. Then they seemed to lose interest and left — only to return to the library 23 minutes later to take their own lives.

At the time, the attack on Columbine was the deadliest high school shooting in American history. Several subsequent mass shootings — Las Vegas, Pulse, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Parkland, just to name a few — have produced higher body counts. But Columbine, with its infamy-seeking teen killers, elaborate planning and impotent police response, remains the singular tragedy that every new eruption of mass murder is measured against.

“People tell me, ‘It’s been all these years, just get over it.’ But it’s not something that you just get over.”

Sadly, Columbine has also become a case study in the long-range trauma inflicted by such an event. In the months after the shootings, reporters wrote frequently

about the challenges faced by the most seriously injured Columbine students, a wealth of inspiring stories about healing and recovery. But there's been surprisingly little written about the less obvious wounds some survivors still grapple with to this day, including panic disorders and PTSD, depression and substance abuse.

Before the killers entered the library, two other students took cover under the same table where Amanda Stair was hiding. One of them was killed. The other barely survived, her shoulder shattered by a shotgun blast. No bullets struck Stair, but that's not to say she emerged unscathed.

"Only half of the kids in the library were shot," she says. "But the others saw and heard things that nobody should see or hear, at any age. I've had people tell me, 'It's been all these years, just get over it.' But it's not something that you just get over."

The rate of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms among combat veterans is estimated to be between 10 and 20 percent. Some researchers suspect it's much higher among survivors of school shootings — not just among those directly terrorized by the shooters, but also across a spectrum of impressionable young people who've just lost friends and seen their world turned upside down. But back in 1999, school and local health officials had little notion of what sort of hurdles the survivors of such an unprecedented event might face, and few resources were available beyond the teams of grief counselors who were summoned in the immediate wake of the shootings.

"The students after Columbine were just wandering around, screaming their stories at cameras," says Reta Wallis, a researcher at Utah State University who has interviewed Stair and several other Columbine survivors as part of her graduate work into the long-term effects of PTSD. "People still aren't being taken care of psychologically. In some cases, their physical health is suffering."

Through her research, Wallis has learned about the “adapted coping behaviors” some survivors have developed on their own to try to combat the trauma they’ve experienced. She’s seen how news about other mass shootings can trigger bad memories and fresh anguish among the former Columbine kids, now in their late thirties. At the same time, some have found solace in connecting with survivors of those shootings and adding their voices to the grassroots campaigns for school safety that have arisen out of the Parkland and Sandy Hook killings. And from listening to those who were there on April 20, Wallis has gathered some ideas about what can be done to better address the mental health needs of school shooting survivors and possibly prevent future tragedies. (The statements below in italics are excerpts from Wallis’s interviews; other quoted remarks by Columbine grads are from interviews conducted by *Westword*.)

Some of the Columbine survivors are dreading the upcoming twentieth “anniversary” of the shootings and all that entails. But they also know that the class of ’99 has a message for the survivors of Parkland, Sandy Hook, Santa Fe High and others: It doesn’t always get easier over time. In some cases, it just gets worse.

“I’m 37 years old now,” says Alisha Basore, who fled her high school as a senior two decades ago when the shooting began and now works as a salon stylist. “It’s been longer now since it happened than the age I was when it happened. I’ve moved on. But there’s still this deep, dark hole I can crawl back into when asked to go there. I don’t sit at home and dwell on it. But when my clients find out I went to Columbine, it’s the same questions: ‘Were you there?’ ‘What did you see?’”



Amanda Stair says the Columbine library survivors "saw and heard things that nobody should see or hear."

Anthony Camera

I could only see them from the waist down, but I saw that one of them had a gun strapped to his leg. I was absolutely terrified...They just kept walking around and shooting for what felt like forever. I heard an explosion directly to my right, where I knew that another girl was hiding. My ears started ringing, and I knew that I was next, I had to be. I put my arms over my head with my elbows facing forward. I squeezed into a ball as tightly as I could. I held my breath and closed my eyes. I waited for a gunshot to rip through my ribs, but it never came...

Eric and Dylan sounded like they were having the time of their lives, making comments about blowing up the library and commenting on the kids they had shot. I heard one of them say, 'Don't worry about it, you're all going to be dead in a few minutes.' I believed what they said. Why shouldn't I? For all I knew everyone in the library was dead.— Amanda Stair

People who know Stair only from her YouTube videos are surprised to discover her age. They don't see the 35-year-old woman who's fluent in Japanese and has a

master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages; they associate her with the reticent, struggling adolescent she describes in a series of recordings she's made about being a Columbine kid.

"I still act like I'm frozen at that age, I guess," she says, sitting in her living room, flanked by shelves of anime DVDs and a display case full of action figures.

In her videos, Stair is remarkably candid about the troubles she was facing in the spring of 1999. Her father was gravely ill, her family was reeling from the loss of another relative to cancer, and Stair was thinking about suicide and what it would be like to cut herself. She'd sought out a school counselor for help, which was what brought her to school on April 20 — and to the carnage in the library.

Over the several minutes she was trapped there, Stair discovered what it was like to brace for death. She also found out she didn't want to die after all. "Emotionally, I shut down," she says. "I went numb. I learned that when something is really serious and going down, I can become coldly logical."

Between thunderous explosions of gunfire, the killers called out to one another, their voices raspy with gunsmoke. At one point one of them was standing over her table. He even put down his gun for a moment; she could hear it scraping on the tabletop. Then they were gone. When she figured it was safe to speak, she whispered to the girl hiding under her table, asking if she was okay. The girl, a junior named Kacey Ruegsegger, said she'd been shot in the arm. Stair tried to reassure her that they were going to make it out alive. Then a boy in a red shirt, Craig Scott, crawled over to check on them. Stair and Scott helped Ruegsegger to a door that led outside. Other survivors began rushing past them. A police car was right outside, the officers waiting for SWAT to arrive before attempting to enter the school — a procedure that was soon abandoned nationwide as a result of Columbine.

Days of shock and confusion followed. Stair had never met Klebold and Harris. But her older brother Joe knew them, and some people suspected Joe was involved, too. Joe had been one of the founders of the so-called Trench Coat Mafia, a loose-knit group of outsiders, during his sophomore year. Harris and Klebold had never been members of TCM, but the fact that they wore trench coats on the day of the attack and that Joe Stair was tall and gangly, similar in appearance to Klebold, helped fuel the rumors about a third gunman. Actually, Joe knew the killers only in passing and hadn't spoken to them in months; he first learned of the attack when Amanda called home after fleeing the library. But that didn't stop reporters from descending on the Stair home and calling constantly, until the family learned to leave the phone off the hook.

Stair says her brother soon began to receive death threats. "People were latching on to the first thing they heard and wanted to be the first to report it, whether it was true or not," she says.

Their entire school sealed off as a crime scene, the Columbine kids finished the year at Chatfield High. Most were just going through the motions, too consumed with grief and anger to pay much attention. For Stair, the most bizarre moment came when police investigators asked her to return to the Columbine library and identify where she'd been during the attack. She walked past boarded-up windows, on carpets scorched from pipe bombs and stained with blood, maneuvering around yellow evidence markers. The newspaper she'd been reading was still on the table, untouched. The air was stale. It was like walking onto a movie set; nothing seemed real.

It wasn't until that day that she realized, from the bloodstains and markers, that a third person had taken cover under the table with her and Ruegsegger. Steven Curnow, a fourteen-year-old freshman, had been killed a few feet from where Stair crouched, deafened by the shooting and waiting for the bullet that never came.

"If I'm having a panic attack, nobody knows why I'm suddenly bursting into tears and need to be alone."

She went to visit relatives in Alaska that summer. Fourth of July fireworks triggered her first panic attack. She had many more of them in years to come, precipitated by loud noises or shouting or sometimes by nothing at all. They began with a tightness in the chest and trouble breathing, followed by a sensation of heat and heaviness that she just had to ride out until it ended, five minutes or a half-hour later, leaving her feeling drained.

Going back to Columbine in the fall helped. The school had brought in extra counselors; Stair, like many of her peers, wasn't inclined to admit she was having problems, but just being around other survivors was a comfort. "The first couple of years were probably the easiest," she says. "We were still around people who were there that day. But once you graduate, you're surrounded by strangers. If I'm having a panic attack, nobody knows why I'm suddenly bursting into tears and need to be alone."

Stair's panic episodes increased in frequency after she graduated from Columbine, and 2007 was a particularly bad year. Her brother Joe took his own life, an event that Stair believes has nothing to do with the shootings; her brother had been battling depression even before the attacks, she says, and had been struggling with personal problems. That same year, the shootings at Virginia Tech, by a gunman obsessed with Eric Harris, sent her "back to where I was right after Columbine — I didn't want people to talk to me or see me."

Two years later she attended the ten-year anniversary ceremony in Clement Park. The event's emphasis on commemorating the wounded and the dead only made her feel more isolated. "Even though I was in the middle of this big crowd, I felt very alone," she recalls. "Unless you were shot or something, you didn't exist."

As part of her graduate work, she decided to conduct a survey of Columbine survivors, trying to gauge the long-term impact of the shootings on their mental

health. “It was depressing to find out so many people were still reporting issues, even fifteen years after the fact,” she says. “One woman told me she doesn’t go anywhere in high heels, in case she has to run. Another person reported that he became an alcoholic and only recently got clean.”

Her own experience of the aftershocks was one of the reasons she began making videos five years ago and posting them on YouTube. She wanted to clear up misunderstandings, dispense with the conspiracy theories that maligned her brother, try to explain what she was going through. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with viewers praising her honesty and courage. Telling her story her own way, without having to respond to the usual barrage of media questions, has been “kind of cathartic,” she says.

Stair’s panic episodes have decreased in recent years. She’s had to contend with a series of physical ailments, including fibromyalgia, which she suspects are stress-related. But she says she’s also gained perspective on what matters in life. She’s worked retail jobs while completing her studies, and her bitter knowledge of what constitutes a true disaster comes in handy when dealing with customer complaints and disgruntled co-workers.

“Sometimes I think, ‘Isn’t that nice, if that’s the biggest problem you have?’ I don’t say anything, but I’m almost jealous that that’s all they have to worry about,” she says. “I want to say, ‘Look, this is not that big a deal.’”



Energy medicine practitioner Chad Laughlin is writing a book about his own journey to healing.

Courtesy of Chad Laughlin

I had a bit of therapy in the beginning, but I didn't feel like there was really anyone that could handle it. I think that the whole community is traumatized, and I don't think that anyone is fully healed...

Like everyone else, I also had survivor's guilt. Our circle of friends does, the people who knew them. I don't think it will ever go away. It comes up every day in our thought processes. I might go the whole day without thinking about it, and then I will drive by a "Respect Life" license plate, and I'll snap right back into it.—

Chad Laughlin

On April 20, 1999, Chad Laughlin was driving out of the Columbine parking lot, headed for lunch with a friend, when he almost collided with Dylan Klebold, barreling into the lot in his BMW. Laughlin backed up to let him pass and offered his childhood friend a friendly one-finger salute.

Klebold was wearing his black duster and a baseball cap turned backwards. He didn't wave back.

It was a quarter past eleven; the attack began three minutes later. Laughlin heard about it when his mother paged him that afternoon, telling him about the news reports of a shooting at Columbine, multiple deaths.

Laughlin couldn't believe it. When he learned the identities of the killers, he was even more bewildered. How could you know someone as well as he knew Klebold, yet not know him at all?

Klebold and Laughlin had been best buds in elementary school, back in the Challenging High Intellectual Potential Students (CHIPS) program for gifted children, a couple of chess-playing nerds. Then Laughlin went off to private school for three years. When he reconnected with Klebold in their sophomore year at Columbine, he found his friend more reserved, with an increasingly darker outlook on life — especially after he began spending more time with Eric Harris.



In his sophomore year, Chad Laughlin reconnected with Dylan Klebold, whom he'd known in elementary school; he last saw Klebold only minutes before the attack on Columbine.

Courtesy Chad Laughlin

Laughlin managed a fantasy baseball league online; Klebold was a regular participant. Laughlin talked to him just about every day and even introduced Harris

to a few girls. (A note from Harris in Laughlin's junior yearbook derided one fizzled relationship and asked Laughlin to "get me some chics this summer k?") But he could also see the bond between Klebold and Harris tightening, to the exclusion of everyone else. He never saw them outside of school, and the two often sat by themselves at lunch.

Yet Laughlin never regarded the pair as outcasts. During their junior year he'd seen them bullied on occasion, but they also had a social network, one that seemed to be expanding as they became seniors. "They weren't born to do this," he says now. "The bullying was a factor, but by no means the only reason."

"We were handed a grief handbook, and that was it."

Like others who considered the pair to be their friends, Laughlin wondered if he couldn't have done something to prevent the shootings. If he'd reached out more, maybe, or picked up on warning signs and clues — like the time Klebold asked a friend to buy eighty bucks' worth of fireworks for him on a run that Laughlin and that friend made to Wyoming. Klebold was using his friends to get bomb-making materials, at a time when Klebold himself couldn't leave the state because he and Harris were on probation for breaking into a van. But what seemed so obvious in hindsight hadn't occurred to Laughlin back then.

For several years, Laughlin pushed the what-if questions out of his mind, the way others pushed away memories of the attack itself. "It was too much to process," he says. "We didn't have any sort of cohesive healing experience that I know of. We were handed a grief handbook, and that was it."

Laughlin says he "numbed himself" through his college years with drinking and partying. Afflicted with allergies and severe asthma, in 2003 he landed in the hospital, having so much trouble breathing that he was placed on a ventilator in an induced coma for several days. The experience prompted him to make dramatic changes in his lifestyle. He began studying Eastern medicine and philosophy in

California; he now has a doctorate in medical qigong, a discipline that explores mind-body-spirit connections, and is completing a degree in acupuncture.

He also began to research what happened at Columbine and examine his own feelings of culpability. He says he's learned to forgive himself, and even the two deeply disturbed teens he once thought he knew, as a vital step in his journey to healing; he's working on a book about the process. At the same time, he believes Harris and Klebold were ambivalent about what they were doing right up until the last few weeks.

"I think one or two nudges in a different direction, a path of healing, could have prevented it," he says. "Dylan was more set up for college than I was."

Laughlin notes that Klebold had tried to treat his depression with an herbal remedy, St. John's wort. He figures his old friend would approve of what he's doing now. As a healer and practitioner of "energy medicine," he can acknowledge the evil that descended on his school without being overwhelmed by it. As he sees it, Harris and Klebold "had to armor their hearts every day until they lost their way."

"We all have our own paths to get back to the heart," he says. "But my generation really got steered out of the heart."



Alisha Basore lost her best friend, Rachel Scott, at Columbine — and bottled up her grief for years.

Anthony Camera

I wanted to be popular, like all teenagers do, so I tried to hang out with the popular kids. As a freshman I was an overweight, 200-pound kid with a unibrow, braces and no boyfriend. But I was friends with everyone; I attended sporting events, dances and pep rallies. If you weren't popular at Columbine, you weren't really anything, but again, I feel like that's every high school. I really disagree with anyone who says that our school was worse when it came to bullying, and I say that as an unpopular kid. Some days I ate lunch alone in the bathroom because a group of girls decided one day not to like me.

— Alisha Basore

Alisha Basore had her first up-close-and-personal encounter with gun violence four months before the attack on Columbine. She was in her car in the Southwest Plaza parking lot, putting on lip balm before heading into the mall with some friends to do some Christmas shopping. She didn't know that one of her passengers had

brought along a .22 handgun. He was fooling around with it in the back seat when it went off.

The bullet went through Basore's lower back and lodged in her thigh. At first she thought the noise was a tire exploding. Then her legs went numb while a fiery pain shot through her back. She leaned on her horn until people started coming out of the mall to find out what was going on. She went to the emergency room. The teen with the gun went to jail for assault.

Basore was in her painting class on April 20 when the shooting began, on the other side of the building from the library. She'd just settled in at her station when she saw a girl running out the east door, shrieking. A few seconds later a fire alarm went off. Then a dean came in and announced that someone was shooting in the school. Everyone got up and headed into a hallway filling with smoke, then out of the building. Basore moved as quickly as she could, but she couldn't run; she was still recovering from the surgery she'd undergone in December.

Basore wasn't injured that day. Her escape wasn't nearly as harrowing as some. Yet the experience tore into her; emotionally, it was far worse than being accidentally shot in her own car. When she exited the school she headed north, through groups of students milling around Clement Park, some of them crying and hysterical. Basore didn't linger; she had to get to a safe place. She knocked on doors in the neighborhood until she found someone who would let her use their phone to call her father. Once she was home, the first thing she did was call her friend, Rachel Scott, to make sure she was okay.

But Scott wasn't home. She was the first one killed that day, shot multiple times as she was having lunch outside the school.

In the hagiography of Columbine, Scott's story looms large, her journals and drawings forming the basis of several inspirational Christian books published by her parents. Basore knew her in a different context entirely, as a giggly, exuberant seventeen-year-old who made friends across Columbine's elaborate social strata

and did a pee-your-pants-funny skit involving various characters from *Titanic*. “I knew who she really was,” Basore says, “because she was my best friend.” Scott and Basore knew many of the same people from working at Subway, dished about boys, went shopping together. Over spring break they’d gone on a road trip to Albuquerque in a purple Hyundai. They had talked about getting an apartment together after the semester ended, even though Scott was only a junior. None of that was going to happen now. Basore wouldn’t even get to groan again as Scott made her listen to Sarah McLachlan’s “In the Arms of an Angel” for the umpteenth time.

“I’ve moved on. But there’s still this deep, dark hole I can crawl back into when asked to go there.”

For many of the young survivors, Columbine was their first experience with losing someone close to them. But on top of the grief was a sense of derailment, a dawning realization that the lives they thought they were going to have had been snatched from them, diverted, ruined. Basore felt that intensely. Seniors like her weren’t going to return to Columbine to “take back the school” — except for one brief day when everyone was supposed to pick up their backpacks, which had been inspected by police for bombs and placed in the gym. Basore went through a war zone of busted glass and evidence markers, a mess that scarcely resembled the school she knew; she wanted to go back to the art room, but it wasn’t allowed.

“I wanted to stay and look around, but they wouldn’t let me,” she says. “Not getting to go back to the school was a big disconnect for the seniors. For me, it was a really big problem. We went to Chatfield for two weeks, we graduated, and that was it.”

At Chatfield, there were platoons of grief counselors offering their services. “Everywhere you looked, someone was saying, ‘If you want to talk, call me,’” she recalls. “I should have done it. But I’m stubborn as hell. I think I can get through

anything by myself and I'll be fine. If I could go back, I'd tell my seventeen-year-old self to take your ass to therapy."

For years she had persistent, recurrent nightmares about shootings and explosions. Her reluctance to go to sleep led to chronic insomnia. She developed an eating disorder — and began to suspect it had something to do with Columbine.

Respite came unexpectedly during the tenth-anniversary ceremonies. A silent remembrance in the Commons was followed by longtime teacher and coach Ivory Moore leading an emotional chant of "We are Columbine!"

"We were just bawling," Basore says. "At the end of that, they let us go walk around the school. For a brief moment, it felt like I was back — everyone walking the halls, passing each other and saying hi. I got to go back to the painting room. It was quiet. It was dark. I remember calling my brother and just crying. I got to go back. I haven't had a single nightmare since."

Basore says other symptoms have eased in recent years, as she's mourned her losses and focused on the future. At times she still struggles with anxiety and sudden surges of fear; a car pulling up next to her at a stoplight can trigger alarm bells, an uneasy, this-is-crazy-but-what-if-it-isn't feeling that someone is going to start shooting at her. She wishes that the mental health resources offered when she was a headstrong teen would have still been available when she was 25 or even today. ("I am now far more willing to go, but therapy is very expensive," she notes.) And she worries about what sort of help will be available down the line for the survivors of Aurora, Parkland and other mass shootings. But like Stair, she also believes her experiences have given her insights into how to move forward.

"I drive every day, and I look at the mountains, and I feel lucky to see them," she says. "I look at my job, my friends, and I am so appreciative of waking up every morning and breathing. I look at life very differently because I know how quickly your life can go upside down, how quickly everything you know can change dramatically for the worse. There isn't much that bothers me or gets to me, because I know that a lot of people have it worse than me."



Sam Granillo leaves artwork by his alter ego, the PonderMonster, in public places to be found by strangers.

Courtesy Sam Granillo

A lot of work has been done since the Parkland shooting. Something feels different this time... We were kids when we went through it, and we just figured that the adults would take care of us and that they would do something about it. But we know now that adults are just big kids, and these [Parkland] kids are pissed and want change. On the day of the tragedy they were mourning, but they went right into action.

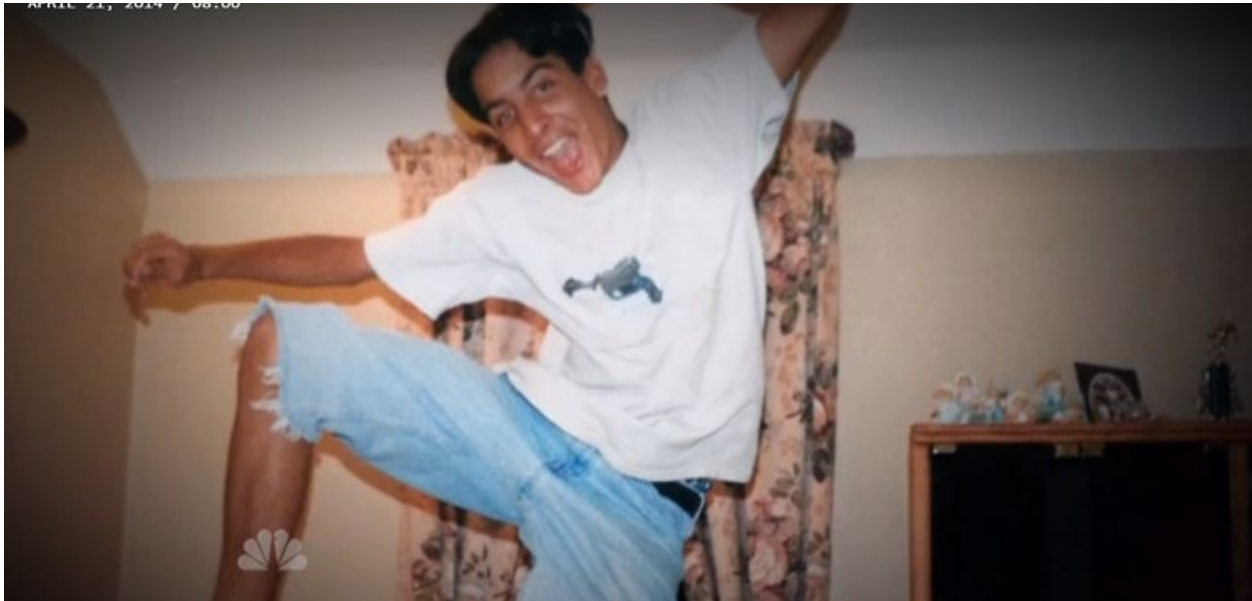
— Sam Granillo

On the morning of April 20, the weather was so balmy that Sam Granillo made plans to eat lunch outside with his friend Rachel Scott. But then the wind picked up, and Granillo told Scott he didn't want his papers blowing around; he'd catch her another time.

He thought about going to the library to study for a test during his lunch period, but the staff didn't allow food in the library. Instead he went to the cafeteria, also known as the Commons. He'd just started on his sandwich when Mr. Sanders ran through the Commons, telling everyone to get down, somebody had a gun. A few seconds later Sanders was back, urging everyone to evacuate.

Kids scattered in all directions, knocking over chairs and each other; smoke started billowing down from a pipe-bomb explosion on the upper floor. Granillo ended up scrambling into a storage room where seventeen people, including one of the lunch ladies, were already hiding. The door had no lock.

They heard explosions, gunfire, the fire alarm. Then the door handle started turning. The killers were on the other side, trying to push their way in. Granillo braced his legs against the door. Other students leaned in as well.



A screen capture from a 2014 *Dateline* episode shows Sam Granillo in his high school years; on April 20 he helped keep the killers from forcing their way into a storage room where 18 people were hiding.

NBC News

The struggle went on for what seemed like a long time. Nobody said a word. At some point Granillo could hear the people on the other side talking to each other, in a calm, ordinary tone of voice. He couldn't make out the words, and he had no clue that one of them was Klebold, whom he'd known since he was ten years old.

The intruders went away. The SWAT team reached the storage room hours later, lined the students up and led them out. The Commons was a wreckage of broken glass and pools of water. Outside, the evacuees were hustled past two lifeless bodies to take cover behind a fire truck. One of them was a girl lying on her back. It was Scott, but Granillo didn't recognize her.

It took days to sort out who was gone, who was in the hospital. Making sense of it took a lot longer. Granillo's mother took him to a therapist, but he felt that he was just saying the things he was supposed to say; how could this person possibly know what he was going through?

Granillo skirted therapy over the next few years, even though he began to have panic attacks and chronic nightmares involving violent chases. After he got news of the Virginia Tech shootings, Granillo left his class at the University of Colorado, sat under a tree...and cried. He began to realize that what he'd been pushing away wasn't just a painful memory but something ongoing, something he had to confront.

After college he worked as a camera operator and production assistant on commercials and TV shows. On his own time, he began filming interviews with other Columbine kids, hoping to put together a documentary about the long-term impact of the shootings. Before long, he was talking to survivors of other mass shootings, too.

"I set out to make a documentary because I didn't know what else to do," Granillo says now. "But it evolved into something bigger than I hoped it would be. It helped me connect with other people, start some conversations."

In 2014, NBC's Dateline followed Granillo as he had some of those conversations with teachers and former students at schools that had experienced similar traumas across the country. The odyssey turned intensely emotional when Granillo encountered a psychologist who'd lost a daughter at the 2008 Valentine's Day shooting at Northern Illinois University.

"I finally talked to someone who was a psychologist and knew what I was talking about," he recalls. "It wasn't just someone who knew the textbook answers. It threw me off guard, and I broke down crying. It was nice just to be understood. It was something I'd been looking for since day one."

"I feel like I'm putting more love back in the universe than was taken from me that day."

Shortly after the program aired, Granillo was approached in the lobby of a Las Vegas casino by soldiers from Fort Hood. They told him they'd seen him on TV, and the program had started a conversation in their platoon about the shooting spree there in 2009 — "things they never would have discussed otherwise," Granillo says.

It's much more common now than it was twenty years ago to see trauma victims reaching out to others with similar experiences. After the 2012 Aurora theater shooting, two members of Columbine's class of '99 decided to start a support group for survivors. The Rebels Project, the nonprofit that evolved out of that proposal, now has 970 members drawn from 56 survivor communities, including incidents in Australia, Canada and Europe.

"We wanted to provide a system of support we didn't have access to in 1999," says Heather Martin, co-founder and executive director of the Rebels Project. "It was time for us to do something."

The group has made presentations at mental health symposia and offers referrals to qualified therapists who are willing to donate their time. But its most valuable service may be its annual get-togethers of survivors from all over, in an environment where they don't have to tell their stories ("Were you there? What did you see?") or be told how to grieve. "The peer support is enough for some people," Martin says. "We're not therapists, but just connecting with other survivors can help with the isolation and embarrassment that many people feel over being visibly impacted or traumatized. You learn there is no time limit, no timeline that works for everyone."

The Rebels Project has helped pave the way for other outreach efforts. After Parkland, one of the student leaders at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School organized a pen-pal program with people from Columbine; Granillo signed up to be paired with a student in Florida and quickly knew he'd done the right thing. "It has been so overwhelmingly therapeutic for both of us," he reports. "I feel like I'm talking to my past and helping myself out by trying to walk someone else through this."

At the same time, commiserating with other trauma victims has its own triggers and hazards. Granillo has found that he's had to step back at times from his outreach and recognize his limits. "It's been painful, reliving that so many times," he says. "Fortunately, it's not all I think about anymore. I've finally gotten to the point where I'm more known for my artwork than my tragedy, which is really cool."

With the aid of Facebook and Instagram, Granillo has fashioned an alter ego known as the PonderMonster, who leaves colorful, psychedelic, blissed-out paintings in public places for people to stumble upon or seek out in an organized treasure hunt. A handwritten note asks the finder to send him a pic of the artwork in its new home so he can post it; the response rate is around 95 percent.

"This is the direction I like better," he says. "I feel like I'm putting more love back in the universe than was taken from me that day."

The equation is an important one. In their basement tapes, the Columbine killers talked about the kind of lasting harm they hoped to inflict on the survivors; they would haunt their dreams, Harris boasted, and “create flashbacks from what we do and drive them insane.” PonderMonster, the Rebels Project and other survivor efforts to create something meaningful out of the worst experience of their lives denies the killers their posthumous victory.

"You learn there is no time limit, no timeline that works for everyone."

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Nationally, the response to mass traumas from the mental health community is much less haphazard than it was after Columbine, when a come-one-come-all summons went out to grief counselors and therapists. Today responders are more likely to be versed in psychological first aid, a flexible form of emotional triage performed in the immediate aftermath of a shooting or natural disaster, and more long-term rebuilding and outreach efforts — approaches advocated by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, among others.

Wallis, the Utah State researcher, also endorses psychological first-aid training for teachers and other school employees, saying that it helps promote “resiliency” in teens. At the same time, she’d like to see dedicated teams of counselors and others who have developed programs for intervention after a traumatic event. She points out that the same skills that help to identify teens who are isolating themselves or thinking about suicide as a result of trauma could also help head off future tragedies.

“I believe if you train teachers in psychological first aid, they will also know the warning signs to look for,” she says. “These programs could ideally prevent a school shooting, but if it did happen, then the district would be ready.”

Her own interviews with Columbine survivors have introduced Wallis to “adults who had to find healing themselves, and it’s taken twenty years,” she says. “We don’t have to have that same result twenty years from now.”

Granillo's advice to other survivors, the advice he wishes he could have given to himself as a grieving teen, is to "heavily rely on your friends and family and reach out to those who may not appear to be reaching out on their own. You don't have to talk about it. Just be around people who are going through the same thing."

It's advice he's taken to heart. A few years ago he married Sarah Bay, a Columbine classmate. "It's been helpful to have someone in my life who's directly connected," he says. "I think you'll find there are a lot of people from Columbine who have ended up getting married to each other."