

The Good Part

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WESTWORD

After Eric Harris shot him and left him for dead on the lawn of Columbine High School, all sixteen-year-old Mark Taylor could think about was seeing his family one more time before the life ebbed out of him. Fighting to stay conscious, he prayed, he babbled -- and, with the aid of police and emergency workers, he made it to the ER, where doctors were amazed to find him still breathing despite massive blood loss from bullet wounds in the chest, side, thigh and leg.

Over the past eight years, Taylor, like other seriously wounded students at Columbine, has had a long road to recovery. He's had letters and visits from rock stars, spent private time with Bill Clinton and appeared in a Michael Moore documentary. He's also learned bitter lessons about false friends, the fickle media and the fleetingness of fame. And belatedly, he's published his own entry in the growing pile of books about the tragedy, *I Asked, God Answered: A Columbine Miracle*.

A slim volume issued by Tate Publishing, a religious publishing house in Oklahoma, Taylor's account is an inspirational memoir that focuses largely on the brighter side of his experiences. "It's a triumph-over-tragedy kind of deal," he says. "It's about forgiveness, and how I came to forgive Harris and [Dylan] Klebold, even though they tried to kill me."

Taylor, who turned 24 last week, now lives in Colorado Springs and spends much of his time talking about forgiveness in churches and motivational gatherings around the country. "So many people let their past hold them back," he says. "They're victims, and then they go out and do something to someone else because they have unforgiveness and bitterness."

The book gives little hint of the obstacles Taylor has faced in his own not-so-distant past. Despite the initial outpouring of support for Columbine families after the tragedy and the eventual government settlements awarded in various lawsuits, Taylor has struggled financially at times; his mother, Donna, says they were practically homeless at one point. He'd transferred to Columbine from a Christian school just a few weeks before the shootings and never returned to complete his education there, despite intense pressure from school officials to come back. (According to his book, a school-district lawyer even threatened to get an injunction to force him to attend Columbine.)

Just getting his book done involved some behind-the-scenes drama. A year-long collaboration with a family physician ended in a dispute over control of the publishing rights. A second deal with a writer at Oral Roberts University went sour, too. Finally, Taylor hired an attorney to draw up a contract with a ghostwriter, who's uncredited in the published volume.

Also unmentioned in the book is Taylor's role in the making of *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore's 2002 documentary about the American gun culture that uses the Columbine shootings as a touchstone for reflection and polemics. Taylor and fellow students Brooks Brown and Richard Castaldo joined Moore for a crucial sequence dealing with Kmart selling ammo to minors ("Attention, Kmart Shoppers," July 12, 2001). Although the stunt shamed the company into changing its policies, Taylor doesn't have fond memories of Moore -- who, he says, used him and other Columbine survivors for his own purposes and then discarded them. "He lied to me on so many levels," Taylor says now. "He said that if I would be in his movie, he'd get me in front of the right people, help me make my own movies. He made promise after promise.... Man, he is something. You'd have to get to know him on a personal level."

But not all of Taylor's brushes with celebrity have been so dispiriting. He's been a guest of infomercial king Kevin Trudeau and shared his story with an audience of 5,000 or so assembled by a California Danish-maker. He's particularly proud of his

testimony before the FDA, criticizing the practice of prescribing anti-depressants for troubled adolescents such as Harris, as well as his quixotic lawsuit against the manufacturer of an anti-obsessive-compulsive drug Harris was taking shortly before the shootings.

Although the case was dismissed, "the main point was to get to discovery," Taylor says. "We got a lot of answers out of that, from deposing Harris's psychiatrist. Just because the pharmaceutical companies have the money to hire all these lawyers doesn't mean that they won the case." In fact, he adds, the other side agreed to donate \$10,000 to cancer research in exchange for Taylor dropping his suit.

Last week, U.S. District Court Judge Lewis Babcock said he wants to send records from Taylor's lawsuit and depositions of the killers' parents to the National Archives and Records Administration, where they would be sealed for 25 years and possibly destroyed. Mark and his mother oppose the move. "We didn't do all this just so the records would get thrown away," Donna says.

These days, Taylor is focusing on how what he's been through might help others.

"The emotional trauma was probably the worst part of it for me," he says. "Not understanding what happened, why they would just shoot me. Seeing my family have a hard time with it. That's why I wrote the book -- to encourage others who've been through some tragedy in their life."

He remembers his godmother reading Bible verses to him about forgiveness as he lay in the hospital a day after the shooting. His body torn by bullets and perforated by tubing, he wasn't ready to forgive anyone at that point, but over time the message started to sink in.

"There was some bitterness at first," he says. "But God has worked with me on that. I've had great opportunities."