

It's the 20th anniversary of Columbine. A survivor of that school shooting is now a filmmaker and you can see her 'We Are Columbine' at the Music Box.



The documentary "We Are Columbine" is at the Music Box in Chicago, the work of Columbia College grad Laura Farber. (Lioness Productions)



Rick Kogan/ Chicago Tribune

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Talking heads, those familiar and often dreary elements of documentary films, have rarely been as powerfully honest and emotionally potent as they are in a spectacular new film that takes us all back to the bloody April 20th day in 1999 when 12 students and one teacher were slaughtered inside a Littleton, Colo., high school.

Do you remember? Probably not because sadly so many tragedies have come since, so much pain and death blotting out the details of that day, one of the

first of what has become an ever growing stack of sorrow. If we remember at all we remember the events, not the people.

That is one of the many reasons you should see “We Are Columbine,” which is having a special showing at the Music Box Theatre the same day it becomes available on iTunes.

It is the work of filmmaker Laura Farber who brings to it a unique perspective. She is a survivor of that horrible day and so are the people she features in her film. We meet Frank DeAngelis, the principal at the time of the shooting, who remained at the school for 15 more years, and Kiki Leyba, an English teacher still on the job. Four others — Gus D’Arthenay, Jaimi Norden, Amy Staley and Zach Martin — were Farber’s classmates.

The five of them were young then, 14- or 15-year-old freshman, and we see them in old photos and film clips, fresh-faced and innocent. And we see them now, good-looking young people in their early 30s and not scarred in any obvious ways until they start to talk about their feelings. All of the interview subjects obviously trusted Farber but all echo with the words of Staley, who says, “I think talking about it more personally is difficult. I think it always will be.”

Serving as one of the film’s executive producers is local filmmaker / writer / teacher Tom Weinberg, who says, “Laura’s work on this film really began 17 years ago when she was a student of mine in a Columbia College documentary class. It could only have been made by someone who lived through the tragedy. She has been passionately committed to the film for many years and it shows.”

After graduating from Columbia, Farber worked as a freelance producer on shows for various cable networks and now runs her own production company. This is her first film and it sets the bar high.

Though she had shared some of her Columbine history with Weinberg, this film did not really begin to take shape until Farber decided to attend the 10th reunion of her 2002 graduating class. She reconnected with former friends, the cameras rolled, and the memories flowed with chilling details and intense intimacy.

Memories of what it was like on that April day, of shots fired, hiding places found and fear.

Memories of running from the school, hands held high.

Memories of the voracious and insensitive media mob that descended on the school and the town and its children. And of the tour buses that would stop so passengers could snap photos.

Memories of returning to the school after attending classes at a nearby high school. With its new security rules and regulations, it “felt like a prison.” Adjustment was painful, as principal DeAngelis recalls, “Being engulfed in the darkness of it, the sense of terror. It took four weeks for me to be able to walk out of my office without crying.”

Wisely, there is no mention of the killers, who committed suicide after the slaughter, and though the film does, as it must, use archival footage of the news coverage, it does so judiciously.



Then-principal Frank DeAngelis in the documentary "We Are Columbine." (Lioness Productions)

One has to remember that in 1999 people lacked the dubious “advantages” of being able to open up on Facebook, Twitter and the like. Most of the survivors held their emotions tight, in private, personal places.

This film gives them the chance to share. It was obviously tough on them all. Tears are shed on camera and as Farber told my colleague Tracy Swartz last year, “When I went back to film, I was so excited just because I've been dreaming to make my own documentary since I graduated. But I had a very strong visceral reaction to being there in that space that I didn't anticipate. I got super ill the first day of filming and couldn't perform one of the walk-throughs ... that first day because I was laying on the couch in the teacher's lounge trying not to puke anymore.”

Farber's former classmates are appealing and thoughtful and she says what she filmed are “their individual memories, our truth. It's about what we are saying, as much as it is about the fact that we are saying it.”

There have been struggles on the way to recovery but all appear to have productive lives as a nurse, a social worker, a musician and a teacher, the latter one of five survivors who currently teach at the high school.

We get thoughtful glimpses into personal relationships and domestic normalcy — gardening, taking kids to the playground — of their lives.

In the two full decades since Columbine, mass slaughters have become a frighteningly frequent part of our lives and the names of the killing fields haunt: Virginia Tech, Pulse nightclub, Sutherland Springs, Parkland, Harvest Music Festival, Sandy Hook.

Surely, some of those places will surely be mentioned Tuesday at a post screening talk with Farber and film-making colleagues Joseph Fitzgerald, Josie Bode, Clare Deady and Heidi Zersen.

They were all part of a remarkable cinematic journey and one has to hope that revisiting this particular nightmare was therapeutic for Farber and for the six people brave enough to speak on camera and so boldly share what remains etched in their heads and in their hearts.