

Shooters' Neighbors Had Little Hint

By Dale Russakoff, Amy Goldstein
and Joel Achenbach
Washington Post Staff Writers
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LITTLETON, Colo., May 1 – Vicki DeHoff has a picture in her head: the pudgy, happy face of a sweet little boy, Dylan Klebold, age 6. Her daughter's playmate.

She can also see Sue Klebold, Dylan's mom, arriving every summer morning at the neighborhood pool. She can see Sue playing with the boys, being affectionate, getting down on the floor with them, acting silly. She can hear a conversation: Isn't it funny, Vicki tells Sue, that in your house you have all these boy toys, while in my house I have only girl toys.

And Sue answers: "Boy toys, but no toy guns."

That's how DeHoff remembers Sue and her husband Tom – as good people, serious about parenting. Dylan and his brother wouldn't even make guns out of sticks.

A few blocks away, Linda Pollack has her own series of snapshots. She's living on West Elmhurst Street, and a new family moves in next door, the Harris.

Wayne and Kathy Harris turn out to be great neighbors. They're always raking their leaves, shoveling their sidewalk, lending a hand in a pinch. And they have terrific boys, Kevin and Eric – pleasant, clean-cut, respectful toward their parents. Pollack's own kids, a few years older, are such troublemakers, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, throwing parties when their parents aren't home.

Pollack says, "I used to imagine Wayne and Kathy looking over here and telling those boys: 'Don't you dare grow up to be like those Pollack kids!' "

Eric Harris grew up to be, as the world now knows, a mass murderer. So did sweet, pacific Dylan Klebold. The two seniors at Columbine High School, who seemed to come from excellent families, who had infinite options ahead of them, chose as their valediction the remorseless slaughter of 12 classmates and a teacher. They wounded 23, some of them disfigured or crippled for life. And they shot themselves. The crime has forced the people who live here to ransack their memories, wondering how they could have missed the incubation of so much evil.



Eric Harris's neighbors gather in their Littleton street: From left, Nicholas Brown, 7; his stepmother, Nanette Molyneux; Pamela Voehl, center; Karen Good and her husband, Mike Good; and John Voehl.

(By Paul Bousquet for The Washington Post)

There are multiple candidates for the cause of the Columbine tragedy. Guns galore, easily accessible. Violent media images. Death-obsessed rock bands. Video games such as Doom and Duke Nuke 'Em. And of course: the parents.

The parents aren't talking. Their perspective comes secondhand. Tom Klebold told a friend this past week that he blames, in combination, the availability of guns and the "the cult of violence as it comes across videos, movies and the Internet," the friend said. Klebold thinks children are the targets of heavy marketing efforts, and that, as the friend put it, "they have no ability to filter values."

But many people have blamed the Klebolds and the Harrises for the crimes of their youngest sons. Surely the boys were neglected, or abused, or at the very least ignored, the reasoning goes. Surely the parents knew or should have recognized a cold-blooded killer in their kitchen, at their supper table, under their noses. The governor threatened prosecution.

Now, another horrifying thought has surfaced: What if they were good – or good enough – parents? What if Vicki DeHoff and Linda Pollack and friends and co-workers saw them as they truly were? What if Carolyn Payne, a close friend of the Harrises, was right when she wrote in the Plattsburgh (N.Y.) Press Republican: "They, like the rest of us are doing the best we know how to raise our children in a very scary world."

And what if her chilling conclusion is right, too?

"We are all one bullet and one pipe bomb away," she wrote, "from the agony of Wayne and Kathy Harris."

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The Columbine tragedy has assumed national dimensions in part because it happened in such an archetypal suburb – with all the same superstores, franchise restaurants, office parks, curving streets, swing sets, privacy fences and factory-sized public schools found in metropolitan areas all over America. The ranchlands southwest of Denver have been converted to subdivisions and malls with an apparently unwavering obeisance to the corporate blueprints. No deviations allowed.

Like so many suburbs, almost everyone here is a transplant. Conoco moved Tom Klebold, a 36-year-old geophysicist, and his family here from Oklahoma City in 1980. Wayne Harris retired from the Army at age 46 in 1993, moving here so he could work for a defense contractor.

The families chose the Littleton mailing address for the reason everyone did – it had represented the good life since at least 1858, when gold was discovered just 2½ miles to the north. There aren't many echoes of the frontier these days. Littleton is now Everyburb, garnished with a view of the Rockies.

South Reed Street is a fishhook-shaped strip of two-story homes with two-car garages, ending in a cul-de-sac. There are no edges here. The houses are linked by identical six-foot cedar privacy fences, so that, from the center of the cul-de-sac, the outside world has been sealed off. The worst thing that anyone can remember happening here was the occasional house getting toilet-papered by pranksters.

So maybe Eric Harris, unlike his older brother, didn't come out to the cul-de-sac to play basketball with Matt Good, who lived two doors over. So maybe Eric's pal Dylan Klebold would drive a hair too fast in his black BMW as he rounded the curve. Certainly no one ever saw any violence here, and residents say they don't remember ever seeing a police car – until the day the SWAT teams showed up, men in black with guns drawn, creeping up to the Harris house from either side. The whole street was evacuated while the cops searched for bombs.

Bobbi Taylor has a mental picture: It's springtime, a generic sunny day. On the back deck of the house behind her, Wayne Harris talks with his son, Eric. Or maybe they are mowing the yard. Or maybe Kathy Harris is tending to her garden, planting, weeding. "As soon as the sun would come out, she'd go turn her dirt," Taylor says.

Today, no one can ask Kathy Harris how her garden grows. The neighbors don't expect to see the Harrises ever again. There are four bags of compost sitting around the yard, one of them partly opened.

Gawkers come through day and night, slowly turning around in the cul-de-sac. What they see is hardly an artifact of evil: a tidy house of brick and blue vinyl siding, indistinguishable from all the others except for its colors.

That's precisely what scares Kipp Smallwood.

"I turn on the news and I see their house, and I think, 'That's my house!' " said Smallwood, 33, who lives on the other side of the street. "It's the exact same house, the same windows, same driveway, same trim, everything except the color. I lie in bed thinking: 200 feet from my bedroom is where this guy conceived this idea to destroy everything we thought we had. Everything you thought you knew about your neighborhood, your schools, your churches – all just shattered. Vaporized. We feel like we're at ground zero."

Every night, as he goes to bed, he looks out at the Harris home, to a window on the second floor – possibly Eric's room, he thinks – and he sees that the lights are still on, a ceaseless, creepy beacon shining across the neighborhood.

"When I found out he lived right behind us, I was just shaking," says Charlene Conner, expecting a baby in June. Her husband, Kerry, said they only knew the people who lived on either side of them, not the people over the back fence.

Residents wonder what else they don't see, what other virus may be hiding under the manicured surface. Life cannot return to normal. Normal is now suspicious.

"Today I was thinking, was my son involved? What's he got in his backpack?" says Steve Cohn.

Cohn was being rhetorical, because he knows his son, Aaron, wasn't involved. He was making the point that he now has to question his assumptions about his relationship with the boy. Does he really know him?

"I thought I did, until this."

Aaron, he said, has been acting numb since the massacre. "He's just not the same as he was before the shooting." To be shellshocked is understandable, given that Aaron Cohn barely escaped with his life, a survivor of the library – "the library" being a supremely chilling phrase for those who know what happened at Columbine on April 20. Cohn was studying at a desk when something exploded in the doorway. He dove to the ground. His friends were getting shot. He sensed someone putting a gun to his head. The killers were playing God, laughing.

Cohn heard one of the killers go up to a girl who was hiding under a desk. The gunman said "Peek-a-boo!" Then he killed her.

He escaped when Klebold and Harris left, briefly, to retrieve ammunition. What makes this story all the more eerie is that when Aaron Cohn came home that night, still spattered in blood, he discovered that Eric Harris lived right behind him, that Eric's was that blue-gray house looming over his backyard. That one. Right there.

That was the night everyone learned who their neighbors were.

So far the information about the Harris and Klebold families that is coming to light is all pretty much the same: These were the kind of folks you'd want next door.

"Wonderful family. All the positives you can imagine," says a friend of the Klebolds, who says she can't give her name because she may be called as a character witness in a legal proceeding.

Vicki DeHoff says of the Klebolds, "Tom and Sue did not cause that behavior by their parenting." She views the case through her Christian faith. "The source of the evil, I believe, was Satan himself."

Randy Brown, a family friend who went to the funeral for Dylan Klebold, said: "They loved their kids. They cared for their kids. They talked to their kids."

So, too, are the Harrises well remembered. Wayne and Kathy married young, in 1970, and a few years later Wayne entered the Air Force. After that the family never stayed anywhere long. Eric was born in Wichita, Kansas, where his father was stationed as a pilot. Then came Dayton, Ohio, and then Oscoda, Mich.

By that time his father was an aircraft commander and instructor at Wurtsmith Air Force Base. Eric's fifth-grade teacher, Bonnie Leach, says, "He was the perfect little fifth-grader." He was an A-student, small for his age. "Adorable," she says.

She remembers being impressed that both of Eric's parents attended parent-teacher conferences. His mother helped out when the class made special shirts for Halloween. "She was just a helpful mom," Leach says. "If I ever called, she was willing to come."

Wayne Harris, meanwhile, was a scout leader and helped coach sports teams. He won election to the Lakewood Shores Property Owners Association. When he ran for the position he wrote that he "desires to become more deeply involved in our community." But then the air base closed. The Harrises moved again, this time to Plattsburgh, N.Y.

Kris Otten became Eric's best friend. He remembers the sleepovers at the Harris home. "It was a real comforting house. Everything was neat and organized," Otten says. Both parents usually were home. Eric's mother was always ready with sandwiches for the boys. They'd play computer games, dive off the couches and pillows in the family's basement, build snow forts.

"The Eric Harris in Colorado that did these things was not the kid I knew in New York," Otten says.

Terry Condo drafted Harris for one of his dozen Little League teams in Plattsburgh in April 1993. The coach thought Harris had some talent. "The bonus with Eric was, he had great parents." Wayne and Kathy Harris attended both games and practices.

But then Wayne Harris retired from the Air Force. The family moved to Colorado. In middle school, Eric Harris became best friends with Dylan Klebold.

It appears that, sometime in his maturation, Eric Harris developed a psychiatric problem. He began taking an antidepressant called Luvox. Whether he took it for depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder or some other ailment, or even whether he was correctly diagnosed, is unknown. What's certain is that when he applied to enlist in the Marine Corps in early April, he said he didn't take any prescription drugs. When the recruiters learned the truth, they rejected him.

The vivid evidence of his mental state was posted on his Web site on America Online for anyone to see. It's no wonder his neighbors didn't detect the killer among them: Harris was holed up in his room, expressing himself in the electronic world. He wrote as though all the normal teenage hormones were channeled into the single emotion of rage.

From his Web page:

"I will rig up explosives all over a town and detonate each one of them at will after I mow down a whole [expletive] area full of you snotty ass rich [expletive] high strung godlike attitude having worthless pieces of [expletive] whores."

He did not rage against his parents. He hated life itself, society, people.

"You all better [expletive] hide in your houses because im comin for EVERYONE soon, and i WILL be armed to the [expletive] teeth and i WILL shoot to kill and i WILL [expletive] KILL EVERYTHING!"

The hatred spewed along the telephone wires, out into the community, across the planet.

But no one saw or heard a thing on South Reed Street.

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Randy and Judy Brown found out the truth about Eric Harris. They read the hostile messages Harris wrote to their son, Brooks, and then read his Web pages, and took them to the sheriff's office, which in turn showed the material to the deputy stationed at Columbine High School. But the authorities didn't take action.

Judy Brown took her complaint about Eric directly to Eric's parents. They listened attentively. Kathy Harris cried. They seemed to be caring parents.

Dylan Klebold showed little sign of being in the same homicidal league as his friend Eric. He seemed to be Eric's sidekick. The boys always got together at Eric's house on the cul-de-sac, not at Dylan's far more palatial home on South Cougar Road, set against a stunning red outcropping among five- and 10-acre estates.

Dylan's father, Tom, worked at home, running his own real estate management business. Tom Klebold had been a geophysicist, a consultant to companies looking for oil and gas deposits in the Rockies, but he'd lost his job several years ago as low oil prices ruined the market. His wife, Sue, granddaughter of the Jewish philanthropist Leo Yassenoff, worked outside the home as a counselor for disabled students in the community college system.

Not long before the shootings, Tom took his son to visit the University of Arizona, where Dylan was accepted to go in the fall. They put a deposit down on a dorm room. He seemed to be looking forward to college, and in fact had talked about it on prom night, when he and his pretty blond date and 10 other friends had rented a limousine and had, by all accounts, a grand time. In retrospect no one can understand why he talked about the future if he was already planning to kill his schoolmates and commit suicide.

Tom Klebold called a friend, a former co-worker, last Monday.

"They're shattered," the friend said of the Klebolds. "Tom broke up entirely three times during he conversation. Yet he's intact. He acknowledges this has happened. He's not in denial."

He said, "Obviously Tom is doing a lot of soul-searching in retrospect about could he have done anything to stop this."

His conclusion: He couldn't have.

The Klebolds have released two written statements since the shooting, including one, after the funeral of Dylan, in which they said they loved their son "as much as we know how to love a child. Our sadness and grief over this tragedy are indescribable."

They sat for a formal witness interview with investigators Friday. The Harris, who also released a brief written statement expressing their sorrow after the shootings, have not been questioned yet, and reportedly have asked for immunity from prosecution.

In the meantime another person searching his memory is John DeVita II, the district court magistrate who oversaw the court-ordered diversion program for Eric Harris and

Dylan Klebold after they were arrested last year for stealing tools out of a van. DeVita was impressed that, at the hearing for the boys, their fathers were present.

Most kids in trouble, he said, come alone, or with their mothers. The presence of the fathers reassured him. DeVita complimented Wayne Harris when he learned that Eric's curfew had been tightened to 10 o'clock on weekends, 6 o'clock on weekdays.

"Good for you, Dad," DeVita said. "It sounds to me like you got the circumstances under control."

Tom Klebold stepped forward to say Dylan's arrest had been "a rather traumatic experience." But he added that the arrest might turn out to be a good experience, that it would straighten him out. When the hearing was over, DeVita felt optimistic. These kids would turn out okay, he thought.

"What's mind-boggling is the amount of deception, the ease of their deception, the coolness of their deception," DeVita says. "The lesson is that we can all be fooled."

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Krystie DeHoff was on her way to the library around 11:30 in the morning on April 20, when she was suddenly yanked out of the hall and hurled into a classroom by a teacher she couldn't even see. She heard explosions. Moans. Cries. The floor shook. She didn't understand what was happening, and could not have imagined that it was being caused, in part, by Dylan Klebold, the boy she used to splash with in the kiddie pool at the Walnut Creek subdivision.

She heard a loud voice in the hall, hysterical, crazed: A male voice shrieking, "I want to die today!"

Everyone around Littleton seems to be no more than two degrees of separation from the brunt of the violence. Many of the injured lived within a couple of blocks of Eric Harris. Valeen Schnurr, 18, who baby-sits for the Smallwoods on South Reed Street, has nine bullet and shrapnel wounds on her left side.

A few doors down is Josh Lapp, 16, another library survivor. He hid under a table, covering a girl, an old friend. She began crying. He hushed her, said any noise would draw the attention of the kids with guns. Lapp saw Klebold, the boy who never had a toy gun, shoot and kill Dan Mauser, 15, who was cowering under a table just behind Lapp. He then saw Klebold pull a knife out of his boot, hold it over the dead boy, and yell, "You know what I've always wanted to do is kill someone with a knife!"

Seconds later, Lapp made eye contact with Harris and Klebold. They walked toward him. He held their gaze. They didn't fire. Lapp explained why he survived. He, too, had watched a lot of violent and gory movies, and he remembered a cardinal rule: "It's harder to kill someone when they're looking you in the eye."

Randy Lapp, Josh's father, now struggles with the meaning of this jangling event. He remembers when he grew up in small-town Minnesota where there were no privacy fences, where all the yards joined. He wonders if affluence somehow contributed to what happened here in Littleton.

"In a neighborhood with houses this size," he says, "everybody's too busy working and making money."

Karen Good, two doors down from the Harrises, says things used to be different on the cul-de-sac. There were mothers and children always playing outside, having each other over for meals and card games. But over time, everyone retreated behind the fences. By the time the Harrises arrived in 1996, nobody even gave them a welcome party.

Which leaves Karen Good to sit in her kitchen and wonder: "Gosh, what if we'd reached out? Would it have made a difference?"

The residents of South Reed Street now have to figure out what to do. Lorie Fattore's kids sleep on her bedroom floor, fearful of being in their own rooms in the dark. Kipp Smallwood is rattled, thinking of how his daughter, Clare, a kindergartner, said to him tearfully, "Daddy, do you think they're going to shoot the little kids too or are they only shooting the big kids?"

There must be some way, the residents of South Reed Street say, to make something good come out of the Columbine tragedy.

Smallwood has circulated an idea: Every night at 7 o'clock, let's turn off the television sets and the computers. Let's go outside, into the cul-de-sac, and spend time together. Let's connect.

"Try to feel like we know each other again," he says.

And for starters, they would learn each other's names.

Staff writers Lorraine Adams and Judith Havemann contributed to this report.