

A Diary of Devastation

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It was a shirt-sleeve day, the kind when the sun bathes pansies and tulips in a way that makes their colors seem unreal - the type of spring day that Colorado is known for.

It's also the time of year that seems so full of promise for high school seniors. With just 17 school days left and graduation a month away, many seniors were filling out surveys for the school newspaper, giving advice to underclassmen and leaving funny notes for their siblings and friends. "Happy stuff," the newspaper's co-editor called it.

At senior prom over the weekend, the white tablecloths were covered with flower petals and candles, and students slow-danced to the theme song, "The Way You Look Tonight."

It all seemed so dreamlike.

On the edge of the soccer field, sophomore Pat Neville was walking through the grass to his car. With a 15-year-old's appetite, Pat was anxious to grab some fast food with his friends. That's when he heard loud noises.

Firecrackers, maybe.

Pat turned toward the cafeteria and library and saw a teen in a white shirt and black pants throw something on top of the school. It looked like a grenade. A few seconds later it exploded, and smoke billowed around the school.

Another teenager in a black trench coat stood shooting an assault rifle at the ground, the dirt flying in all directions.

"Oh, my God, it's not a prank," Pat said to himself. He took off toward the park. He had never run that fast in his life.

The boy in the trench coat turned to a girl and shot her in the leg. Senior Wade Frank watched as another boy ran to help the girl, bleeding on the curb. "The trench coat walked up and shot the boy point blank in the back," Wade said. "He was just totally calm about everything."

In the cafeteria, it was free-cookie day. Students were eating sandwiches and gossiping about the prom - who went with whom, who had the best dress. Then they heard loud noises coming from the parking lot. People looked up from their lunches as a group of boys ran through the cafeteria and up the stairs to the upper level.

Must be the senior prank, many students thought. After all, the seniors already had closed the junior parking lot with cement blocks. Everyone thought they'd come up with something better than that.

Then the door flew open, and teacher Dave Sanders jumped up on a plastic cafeteria chair.

"Get under the tables!" he screamed. "GET DOWN!"

There was just an instant as the words sank in.

Then chaos overwhelmed the cafeteria as hundreds of students scrambled to get underneath the round lunch tables. The semi-circular windows that overlook the senior lot fogged with smoke.

Two boys entered the cafeteria. One, in a white shirt, had an ammunition belt draped around his body and was carrying a large gun. The other, in a black trench coat, had a shotgun and a pistol.

Freshman Casey Fisher hadn't made it under the tables. He was in line getting his lunch when one of the gunman shot someone 10 feet from where he was standing.

"It sounded like a bomb going off," Casey said.

Parent and lunchroom worker Karen Nielson ran to help some kids who were hurt. But the boy in the long jacket fired another 20 rounds. "He just kept firing," she said. "They went into the kitchen and started blasting."

Keni Dooley crawled from under the table and slipped out into the parking lot. The 16-year-old crouched between two cars for more than two hours. "Please don't let anything happen to anybody," she prayed to herself.

Inside, students started crawling over backpacks toward the stairs out of the cafeteria. Some janitors tried to direct traffic. "Someone got shot!" a student yelled.

Many students got up and ran up the stairs. They were screaming and crying. They could hear bullets hitting metal: the stair railings, the lockers.

In the hallway upstairs, senior Jon Behunin saw a stampede.

"I had to stand up against the lockers so that I wouldn't get trampled," he said.

"Everyone was mobbing past me in a panic."

At the top of the stairs, Dave Sanders, the teacher who had warned the cafeteria of the gunmen, fell to the ground. He was bleeding heavily. "He was on his elbows trying to direct kids," said senior Rachel Erbert.

Senior Adam Foss was across the hall in the choir room when someone ran in and yelled, "There's a gun!"

After half the room fled, Adam stuck his head out into the hallway and saw a gun barrel pointed at Sanders.

"I saw the teacher say, 'Get down,'- " Adam said. "I think he was trying to make sure all of the kids got out of the hallway."

The gun went off and Adam saw Sanders fall into the lockers. Adam locked the door and led students into an office off the choir room. They huddled there for hours.

Senior Seth Houy finished lunch and decided to go the library to leaf through magazines and hang out with his sister. He heard shots but thought they were from a paintball gun.

Then a teacher ran into the library. She had blood on her shoulder.

"There's a guy with a gun. Everyone get down!" she yelled.

Students ducked under the wooden tables and waited. Many turned chairs sideways and tried to use them as shields. Seth tucked his sister's head and her friend's under his body, covering them like a shield underneath the table. The students heard explosions from downstairs and pieces of the ceiling fell around them.

They heard voices approaching the library: "This is for all the people who have made fun of us all these years."

From underneath a table sophomore Brittany Bollerud could see only the gunmen's combat boots and the bottoms of their coats. They were laughing as they shot at students.

"This is revenge," they said as they fired their guns.

Seth heard them say something about shooting everyone with a white baseball hat. He was wearing one. He ripped it off and stuffed it underneath him. It was the only time he moved while the gunmen were in the room.

As the gunfire continued, the two boys walked around and taunted people.

"Look at this nerd," the gunmen said. Then everyone heard repeated shots.

"Look at this nigger." More shots.

"It was like a war in there," Brittany said.

Seth told his sister to pray. "I told them the only thing that would protect us was God," he said.

Brittany thought she was in a dream. "But then I saw blood everywhere, and I knew it was real," she said. She thought she would never get out.

The shooting continued for about 10 minutes. One of the gunman dropped a clip while the other reloaded. Then they ran out of the room. The students slowly got out from under the tables and fled, stepping over classmates on their way out. There were bodies everywhere.

"Honestly, I think that God made us invisible," Seth said. "We prayed the hardest we'd ever prayed, and God put an invisible shield around us."

Much later, Denver Detective Alex Woods entered the library looking for bombs. What he saw, he described in one word.

Carnage.

There were bodies under desks, some curled up in fetal positions. Nobody was alive. "It's devastating," he said. "These are just defenseless kids."

Teacher Dave Sanders limped to a science room down the hall and collapsed. "He left a couple teeth where he landed," freshman Kathy Carlston said. "He was bleeding really bad."

Sophomore Kevin Starkey got boys to take off their shirts to cover Sanders. Others got blankets from the room next door. They tried to stop the bleeding with pressure.

Sanders was coughing up blood. His face was pale, but he was breathing. He started to drift off. Kevin knew that he had to give Sanders hope to keep him alive. He took pictures of Sanders' daughters out of the teacher's wallet and held them up.

"Tell me about them," Kevin said.

It worked. Sanders stayed awake. Teacher Theresa Miller called paramedics and gave them detailed directions to the classroom. Then she walked over to Sanders.

"Hang in there, buddy," she said.

The students lay on the cold tile floor and waited.

Another teacher wrote, "One bleeding to death" on a dry-erase board. She propped it in the window for police to see.

Hours went by before the SWAT team arrived. They pointed guns at the students and told them to put their hands on their heads. Kevin asked the police if they all could carry Sanders using a folded up table as a backboard. They said no.

Some rescue workers huddled around the teacher as SWAT team members led the students out of the science room and into the lunchroom.

The cafeteria was flooded with 3 inches of water from the fire sprinklers. A Styrofoam plate with two uneaten pieces of pepperoni pizza sat untouched in the lunch line. Backpacks littered the place.

The SWAT team told the students not to touch any bags as they went outside. Kathy passed a boy lying next to a stairway outside. His face was pale, and he was surrounded in blood. He was dead.

"It looked like he was looking right at you," she said. "We had to keep going not to throw up."

There was a dead girl at the top of the staircase. She had a pony tail and still had her backpack on.

"Her eyes were glazed over," Kathy said. "You know that last scene in Titanic, where they show all the dead people? It looked so much like that. "We had to keep running."

The students didn't know it then, but Dave Sanders didn't make it. He died in a police officer's arms.

Blocks away, students stood on the stage in an elementary school auditorium waiting for their parents. Cut-out construction paper silhouettes on the wall behind them made a rainbow of faces.

"We still haven't found my brother," one girl said between sobs.

Panicked parents who didn't see their children on the stage wandered the auditorium floor with desperate looks, asking anyone they knew for news of their children.

Outside, teachers posted sign-in lists with children's names. They were filled with the bubbly scrawl of high school students, and parents scanned them frantically looking for familiar handwriting.

Other parents stood on fences, peering over the crowds as yellow school buses full of students pulled up to the school. With each bus, there were ecstatic cries and tearful reunions.

And as the last student got off each bus, some parents had panic in their eyes. Others stood in a daze. For them, there still was no reunion.

On cell phones, they called their child's friends, hospitals.

That night a handful of parents remained at the school. Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas told them that officers could not reach all of the bodies in the school because of bombs and booby traps that surrounded them.

They asked in desperation: Is there any way they could be alive inside the school? They wanted lists of names. Instead, he asked for physical descriptions - tattoos, jewelry. He told them to gather dental records and fingerprints.

"We've never been down this road before," he said.

Two women ran out a side door and vomited.

Counselors, pastors, nuns in habits outnumbered the parents four-to-one.

Scrawled on a pink sign over the basketball hoop were the words: "Prayer corner. Please join us."

Michael Shoels walked out of the school almost in a daze as media from all over the world surrounded him. A student had pulled his wife aside and told her that he saw their son, Isaiah, get shot. But still they held out hope. They prayed that he was at a friend's house, that he would call like their other two children had done.

"It's like a dream I'm trying to wake up from," Michael Shoels said. "Things are not looking good at all." But Isaiah never called, never came home. The Shoels found out Wednesday afternoon that police found Isaiah's body in the

library. Shoels told television reporters his son had two strikes against him: He was black, and he was an athlete.

"These hate crimes have to stop," he said.

Joann Foss was one of the lucky moms. She felt anxiety at first, then elation as she was reunited with her twin sons. Then helplessness set in.

Like many parents, she could not fathom her boys' experience. Nick and Adam, both seniors, told their heroic, horrific tales. Their mother nodded, understanding nothing.

"I can't relate," she said. "You want to understand, to bond with them, but you can't. I've never seen anyone killed. I've never been in that situation."

That night, Nick went off to a friend's house in the mountains to be alone, to sort it all out. Adam couldn't sleep.

Staff writers Kevin Simpson, Marilyn Robinson and Janet Bingham contributed to this report.