

Columbine

February 27, 2000 by Dan Luzadder

A series that focused on the victims and community impact of the Columbine High School shootings. Originally published in the Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO) in 1999.

Inside the Columbine Investigation

They were determined to do it right. Now, the law enforcement professionals investigating a terrible tragedy are finishing their work. This is the story of what they did -- and the toll it took on them.

Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas, pictured in his office last month, had the heartbreaking task of telling a parent that his 14-year-old had been killed at Columbine. The case took an emotional toll on Thomas and many other involved in the investigation.

Dave Thomas didn't want to wait.

It was Wednesday, April 21, 1999 -- 24 hours after gunshots and explosions pierced the quiet of a spring day at Columbine High School.

Now, Jefferson County's district attorney held a list of 13 names -- a teacher and 12 students who hadn't come home the night before.

The teacher and the kids, Thomas knew in his heart, were dead.

Many of their families, filled with dread, had gathered at Leawood Elementary School, a quarter-mile from Columbine, waiting for their awful fears to be confirmed.

It would take another day for the coroner to formally identify the bodies.

But Thomas, 51, a graying man whose sad green eyes had seen tragedy in the courtroom and in his own life, couldn't bear to prolong their agony. So he drove to Leawood and walked inside.

There, he encountered Bob Curnow, whose son Steven was on the list.

"I don't know how to tell you this," Thomas began.

"You don't have to," Curnow replied. "It's written on your face."

Later, Thomas phoned Ray Kechter, an investigator in his own office. Kechter's grandson, 16-year-old Matt, was on the list, too.

As they talked, Thomas made his friend a promise.

Then, numb with grief, he returned to Columbine to get his first look inside the school.

Don't touch anything, investigators warned him.

In the library, where 12 died, he found the body of Cassie Bernall, facedown on the floor. Her hair looked so clean and shiny.

Then he saw Matt Kechter, his body intertwined with Isaiah Shoels' under a table near the windows.

He knelt quietly, carefully, and, as he'd promised a broken-hearted grandfather, Dave Thomas began to speak.

It's OK, Matt, he said softly. Everything's going to be OK. Your family will make it. They'll find a way to move on. Please don't worry about them. Everything's going to be all right.

He hoped Matt could hear him.

In the days, weeks and months to come, a task force of more than 100 detectives from a dozen local, state and federal law enforcement agencies would mount the biggest criminal investigation in Colorado history.

They would use sophisticated computers to track thousands of tips and pieces of evidence and enhance bits of grainy videotape. They would conduct 4,500 interviews with students, teachers, parents and others -- anyone who had been at Columbine that day, anyone who knew Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two killers.

They would forge an unprecedented bond of teamwork among traditionally turf-conscious police agencies.

And they would struggle, sometimes in vain, to hold back a flood tide of emotion.

They would try, fighting through anger and bafflement, to answer the biggest question of all: What drove these boys to hate so much?

Now, almost eight months after the worst school shooting in U.S. history, Jefferson County sheriff's officials are poised to release their final report on the events of April 20.

This is the story of that investigation.

Sheriff's Lt. John Kiekbusch stands in a room containing 300 binders filled with reports from Columbine investigators. Kiekbusch is directing the criminal probe of the high school tragedy, an exhaustive inquiry nearing its completion.

For Jefferson County Sheriff's Lt. John Kiekbusch, it began as a typical Tuesday morning.

A crack homicide investigator for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, Kiekbusch was in the midst of a tedious meeting with a federal grants writer.

Then a deputy stuck his head in the door.

Turn on the radio, he said. There's been some kind of school shooting.

Kiekbusch nodded. Sure. A bad joke.

But the moment he flipped on the radio, he froze:

"Possible shots fired at Columbine High School."

Minutes later, Kiekbusch gunned his squad car out of the parking lot at the sheriff's headquarters in Golden and roared across Sixth Avenue, the gas pedal punched to the floor. As the car lurched, the siren mysteriously quit. Then the flashing red lights cut out.

A tiny fuse, deep beneath the dash, had blown.

Kiekbusch's radio crackled with emergency calls as other vehicles raced toward Columbine, a proud suburban high school with almost 2,000 students.

Speeding along without lights or sirens, a frustrated Kiekbusch alternately rode the brake and jammed the gas, surging helter-skelter through traffic in his unmarked squad car.

Back at headquarters, detective Kate Battan returned from an early lunch to find a crime-scene van idling at the curb.

Something's up, she told herself, hurrying toward the investigators' offices on the second floor.

"Where is everyone?" she asked.

She found them in a conference room, crowded around a color television suspended from the ceiling. The first broadcasts from the school flickered across the screen.

Two minutes later, she was back in her car, alone, on a drive that would take her on an unfathomable descent into horror.

As the investigators sped out of the Jefferson County government complex near Golden, Dave Thomas stood in his nearby office, away from the windows, reviewing paperwork. He didn't see the detectives' cars tearing by.

Soon he was riveted to his own TV -- a small, two-dial, black-and-white set on his windowsill.

Students fleeing Columbine were claiming that a senior named Eric Harris was one of the gunmen.

Kathy Sasak, one of Thomas' top prosecutors, turned to a computer at his desk and ran a search on Harris' name.

"He's in the system," she said.

On the screen was a 1998 court file detailing the boy's arrest for breaking into a van and documenting his trip through juvenile courts into a pre-trial diversion program.

Thomas scribbled notes on Eric David Harris -- 18 years old, 5-foot-9, 140 pounds, brown hair, green eyes, born April 9, 1981, his Social Security number. As he looked for more information, up popped the name of Harris' co-defendant in that case: Dylan Bennet Klebold, 17.

Thomas grabbed assistant DA Mark Pautler and hurried to the parking lot downstairs. Together they sped toward Columbine 14 miles away, carrying a legal pad full of notes on the potential suspects.

As Battan screeched to a halt outside Columbine, she encountered more police cars than you'd see at a cop's funeral.

By early afternoon, 615 officers from 27 agencies had converged on the school. Kids kept pouring from the doors, hands on their heads, and running for their lives toward Clement and Leewood parks and into nearby neighborhoods.

A SWAT team moves through a neighborhood near Columbine High School on April 20. Soon after the first reports of shooting, 615 officers from 27 law enforcement agencies rushed to the scene.

Investigators stopped every student and teacher they could to ask them what they had seen -- and whether the gunmen might have slipped out the door in the crowd.

Thomas and Pautler worked their way through the confusion, finally finding Sheriff's Sgt. Randy West, a seasoned investigator and supervisor, at a temporary command post in Clement Park. Thomas thrust the notes on Harris and Klebold into his hands.

But Lt. Dave Walcher, marshaling the massive initial response to the shooting, was already holding a list of five potential suspects. Harris and Klebold were 1 and 2.

"That's literally how far behind the incident the investigation was running," Walcher says. "Twenty minutes, no more."

The last gunshots -- the ones signaling the death of the two gunmen -- had not yet been fired. But already the investigation was in high gear, unfolding in multiple directions.

As students fled Columbine, they encountered not only detectives but journalists. Often hysterical, the kids blurted what they believed they had seen. In those first, frenzied minutes, myths about Harris and Klebold began to form -- and flash around the world.

Some students said Harris and Klebold always dressed in black, like Goths.

Some described them as computer geniuses, Hitler fanatics and members of a mysterious organization, the "Trench Coat Mafia."

Investigators would spend months chasing those myths, only to debunk most of them.

When he heard the news on the 18th floor of the Denver Federal Building downtown, FBI supervisor Dwayne Fuselier, head of the regional domestic terrorism unit, had more on his mind than a hostage situation at Columbine. His son Brian was a student there.

Fuselier was the first FBI supervisor on the scene. In a shirt and tie, he stood out among the crowd of uniformed officers. With him was Sgt. Don Estep, a Jefferson County sheriff's deputy on special

assignment with the FBI. Estep quickly found Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone and undersheriff John Dunaway and introduced them to Fuselier.

Minutes later, in a squad car, Estep brought Fuselier and John Kiekbusch together.

Fuselier soon would be named to a command team to oversee the investigation -- and to bring in badly needed federal resources.

He spent much of the first afternoon inside an Arapahoe County sheriff's van talking on his cell phone to students barricaded in the school. With him were two other seasoned FBI hostage negotiators.

One of them, Mark Holstlaw, had been at home, just a quarter-mile from the school, when the call came. He'd had a tooth pulled that morning, and he was holding an ice pack to his jaw.

"I didn't think I would be much good as a negotiator with a mouth full of cotton, but I went anyway," he recalls.

Using extension numbers supplied by school officials, the negotiators talked with students in the administration area, the choir room and elsewhere.

As they dialed, Fuselier, wondering where his son was, spoke with his wife, Mimi.

Do you know where Brian is? she asked.

He told her he believed their boy was at the public library across Clement Park from the school. But he wasn't sure.

"I didn't tell her that I knew then that we had students who had been killed outside," he says.

At the scene, Kiekbusch and West talked about how to structure the investigation.

West recommended that Battan, 41, be named lead investigator. Her specialty was financial crimes, but she had worked plenty of homicide cases in seven years as a detective.

Her dedication was well-known. In her office, a simple sign reads:

"We speak for the dead."

While Battan and West would coordinate every angle, ultimate command of the investigation would fall to Kiekbusch, 53, a career cop with a sandy mustache, a quick smile and a reputation as a meticulous and sometimes demanding boss.

Stone had known Kiekbusch for three decades -- they'd worked heists together as young detectives in Lakewood.

He was confident his old friend could handle whatever the case would bring.

By 2 p.m., less than three hours after the attack began, Battan, cell phone glued to her ear, had crafted the affidavits she needed to get search warrants for the homes of Harris and Klebold.

Information on Harris and Klebold -- and a growing number of other potential suspects -- was coming in as quickly as investigators could grab her attention.

She scrawled notes, then phoned the information to the sheriff's office, where a secretary typed it up. Battan recited the boilerplate language of an affidavit and fleshed it out with emerging facts.

As she worked, she sent detectives to the Harris and Klebold homes.

Their orders: Kick everyone out, make sure it's safe, secure the scene, wait for the warrants.

Already Battan was thinking: No mistakes. Handle everything as if it will end in a major prosecution.

"Everyone learned a lot from hearing about the O.J. Simpson case and from the JonBenet Ramsey case," she says. "We didn't need another situation like those."

At the same time, Estep and other intelligence officers probed for everything they could learn about Harris, Klebold and others who might have been involved. If they had to negotiate with the gunmen, Estep reasoned, they'd need that information, and fast.

But how many suspects were there?

No one knew.

Shaken students described a dozen characteristics of the gunmen. Someone was shooting from the rooftop. Two gunmen were wearing dark, Western dusters. One killer had a white T-shirt.

Out of the chaos, conflicting stories became the rule. Investigators got the first inkling of how difficult their work would be.

There would be at least 2,000 witnesses to interview -- some who saw nothing, others who knew a lot. Some would be wounded students. Many others would be in shock themselves.

Battan dispatched detectives to every hospital.

She sent them in pursuit of the first wave of evidence -- bloody clothing, bullet fragments, statements from the wounded.

Fuselier had spent hours trying to calm students still inside the school. At 3:30 p.m., his phone rang.

His wife was at Leawood Elementary, where frantic parents had rushed to await word on unaccounted-for children.

Brian's safe, she told him. He's here.

Barely 10 minutes later came a brief radio transmission from a SWAT team working its way through the Columbine library. The words stopped everyone in their tracks.

The bodies of Harris and Klebold were on the library floor, apparent suicides. Around them lay the bodies of 10 students they'd killed there.

Bomb squad trucks are deployed to remove explosives found at Columbine. Investigators found more than 80 bombs in the school and the cars and homes of the killers.

It was 4 p.m., and the enormity of the massacre was just beginning to sink in. West said collecting thousands of pieces of evidence would strain the sheriff's resources.

"What can I do to help?" FBI agent Fuselier asked him.

Thirty minutes later, 18 FBI evidence specialists were headed for Columbine. But before they could begin to dissect the crime scene, they had to solve a major problem.

The two killers had tossed bombs all over the school in their death march. Some appeared to be rigged to injure police officers and rescuers.

It meant investigators couldn't get inside to start assessing the crime scene, to remove bodies or gather evidence, until every explosive had been defused.

Thomas milled about the command post, watching SWAT teams gear up for repeated sweeps through the school.

He saw students and teachers moving through the park. Finally, he approached a group of kids huddled together and sat down on the grass with them.

He offered them his phone so they could call their parents, only to find that the blizzard of cellular traffic made it nearly impossible to get through.

One of the first students he talked to was near hysteria.

"I saw him shoot Rachel Scott," the boy cried. "I saw him. I know she's dead. I saw her go down."

Thomas tried to calm him.

"I said the stupid things to him that you say. 'Everything is going to be OK, it's going to be OK,'" Thomas says. "And you know it isn't going to be OK. It never will be OK again."

As day turned to night, investigators hauled evidence from the homes of Harris and Klebold.

At Harris' house, they found the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun, bomb-making materials and a journal filled with hateful ramblings and threats.

They found videotapes, some showing Harris, Klebold and two friends shooting guns. They confiscated a computer filled with Harris' bitter writings.

In Leawood Elementary's gymnasium, scores of anxious parents milled about, disbelief on their faces. They'd heard the news reports that Sheriff Stone feared the death toll could climb as high as 25. And they hadn't found their kids.

In the early evening, Thomas headed there. So did county coroner Nancy Bodelson.

Thomas climbed onto the stage and began to explain that authorities were trying to get the Columbine kids to Leewood. He told them not to worry.

Then Bodelson took the stage, looking out over a room of distraught parents. She explained her job - to identify the dead and to learn how their lives ended.

Dealing with traumatized families was nothing new for Bodelson, 48. She'd spent years as an emergency room physician, trying to put broken bodies back together, consoling families when she couldn't.

Now she found herself asking families for information.

She handed out forms asking for the name, age, address, height, weight, clothing and any distinguishing marks of students still unaccounted for.

When she told parents she might need their children's dental records, their faces went pale.

She asked them to note whether their children had driver's licenses in case she needed their fingerprints. She walked out with more forms than she would eventually need to identify the dead.

About 9 p.m., outside Columbine, Sgt. West called his wife.

"Don't send the kids to school tomorrow," he told her.

As night fell, SWAT teams were still going through Columbine room by room. They knew Harris and Klebold were dead, but other gunmen might be hiding inside.

They summoned Thomas Lofland to help.

The master electrician for Jefferson County schools, Lofland knew Columbine's layout from one end to the other. He also could shut down the blaring fire alarm that distracted and frustrated the police inside.

But when Lofland arrived, the officers made it clear it was risky work. Explosives littered the school.

Lofland shrugged off the danger. He would do what he could.

SWAT members gave him a bulletproof vest and helmet.

"I felt terrified," Lofland says. Then a sheriff's captain rejected the idea of taking him inside.

Instead, Lofland recounted every detail he could think of, hiding places such as elevator shafts, maintenance and heating runs -- and ways to get to them.

Then he found a place to sit near the Red Cross tent, adjacent to the command post in Clement Park. From there he watched.

SWAT teams kept coming out of the school for debriefings. He could see the pain on their faces.

"Some of them were in tears," he says. "It was very emotional to see, these guys in their combat gear. They were very affected."

Shortly before 10:30 p.m., bomb technicians cleared a path to the administration area, where control panels for the electrical system were located. A single officer escorted Lofland and another electrician inside, telling them to follow close behind.

"We were seeing shell casings on the floor and bullet holes in the walls," Lofland says. "A television set in the administration area had been shattered, the teachers' mailboxes had been knocked over, and live rounds and casings were on the floor."

They quickly found the main power source for the fire alarm and cut it.

An eerie silence fell over the school, broken only by the steady spray of indoor sprinklers that had flooded the floors. Strobe lights used as a fire alarm for the deaf continued to flash -- and would for another three weeks. Lofland cut off water to the sprinklers.

Outside, as officers thanked the two electricians for their help, a powerful explosion ripped the night air.

A chill went down Lofland's back. There was no doubt about the sound -- it was a bomb.

The device, recovered inside the school, had detonated as it was being loaded into a bomb trailer.

Nobody was hurt. But the incident frayed what nerves the bomb technicians had left, and it pushed commanders to make a quick decision.

People were exhausted. Someone might get hurt.

They sent everyone home to rest, posted security at the perimeter and agreed to regroup at 6:30 Wednesday morning.

Moments earlier, agent Marcus Motte of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had gone inside the school with bomb technicians. He was peering into the flooded cafeteria, looking at hundreds of backpacks left behind 11 hours earlier by panicked students. Some floated in the water covering the floor. Others sat on top of tables.

The instant the fire alarm went dead, Motte heard a strange, almost surreal sound welling up faintly from inside, like birds chirping.

Across the cafeteria, telephone pagers in the abandoned backpacks were going off, unanswered calls from desperate parents.

Where are you? Please, please call home.

As Kate Battan stepped through the shattered doors of Columbine High School at 7:30 Wednesday morning, she could hear only one sound: the pounding of her heart.

Everything else was silent, enveloped in unearthly quiet.

Battan moved carefully past broken glass and shell casings and into the school. West, Bodelson and Chris Andrist, supervisor of the sheriff's crime laboratory, walked beside her.

Bodelson had awakened early. She spent time reassuring her two teen-agers, both students at Wheat Ridge High School, that everything would be OK.

You don't need to worry, she told them. You're at a good school.

"Mom," her daughter replied, "Columbine's just like Wheat Ridge."

Now Bodelson was at Columbine, where bullet holes pocked the walls and the acrid odor of black powder lingered in the air.

The four investigators moved to the entrance of the library. They carried notepads, a Polaroid camera and sheets of paper with descriptions of missing students.

The SWAT teams and paramedics who had looked inside the library had told them it was bad. Now they were going to see how bad it really was.

The four colleagues were no strangers to the abrupt reality of violent death. But this was somehow different, foreign, out of place. Bodies in a school library, blood on the books.

"It was like all of a sudden looking up and seeing the sky a different color," Battan recalls.

The bodies of 10 victims lay where they had fallen during the 7 1/2 minutes of madness in the library. Nearby were the bodies of Harris and Klebold, who had picked the scene of their worst carnage to end their lives.

"My God," Bodelson thought, "what happened here?"

She gazed over chairs that stood out of place and saw the scarred carpet, singed by a bomb, computer screens in pieces from shotgun blasts.

Then she looked down at the bodies on the floor. She could think of only one thing -- her own teenage children.

"I just felt so sad," she says. "It was like I wanted to hug every one of them for their mom and dad."

This was a school, a place where kids laughed, passed notes, studied.

It was now a place where they had died.

The investigators moved through the library, not touching anything, counting the dead, snapping instant pictures of the victims, noting their clothing and physical descriptions. It was part of a process of identification. The first step.

In about an hour, Battan, West, Bodelson and Andrist finished their work and walked silently back to the main doors on the east side of the school, lost in their own thoughts.

Before they stepped out into the sunlight, Battan took a deep breath and wiped away tears from what she calls "an emotional moment."

Then she put on her game face. There was work to do.

Investigators faced a daunting task.

It was as if the toughest jigsaw puzzle they could find had been dumped on the ground, minus the box-top photograph and a handful of the most important pieces.

The amount of evidence was staggering. Any speck of blood, shard of glass or chunk of lead could prove to be crucial.

There were thousands of leads to follow and people to interview. Every kid who had been in the school could have seen something important.

Phones rang constantly at police agencies across the metro area. The tips ranged from logical to absurd. All had to be pursued.

The first challenge was to remove 15 bodies from the crime scene without disturbing vital evidence.

Directed by Andrist, 44, investigators started with Rachel Scott and Daniel Rohrbough, the two students killed outside the school.

Then they worked their way through the library, where 12 bodies lay, and afterward, the science room, where teacher Dave Sanders died.

The arduous process lasted well into Wednesday night.

Andrist divided the school into grids and organized seven evidence teams -- two for the library, one for the cafeteria, three for the rest of the building and one for the grounds outside.

He assigned experts from departments across metro Denver to the teams, making sure each had specialists in ballistics, blood evidence and other categories. Each team included a Jefferson County technician to preserve the chain of evidence.

In most criminal cases, investigators collect evidence and haul it to a vault at sheriff's headquarters. For Columbine, they brought an evidence vault to the scene -- a large trailer that sat outside the front doors for weeks.

A tent was set up outside the trailer. Each piece of evidence was brought to the tent, where it was sealed and initialed. Then it was logged and stored in the trailer.

But not everything went smoothly. Investigators swarming across southern Jefferson County were tripping over each other.

They knocked on the doors of students who'd seen shots fired, only to find another officer had just been there.

Six detectives proudly presented Battan with 1998 Columbine yearbooks.

No matter how well organized, such a huge case inevitably sparked confusion, duplication and conflict.

Even Bodelson and Thomas -- the coroner and the DA -- debated the best way to notify the families of the dead.

Thomas had the names of the 13 victims, the list assembled by comparing the forms parents had filled out the night before with the information Bodelson, Battan, West and Andrist gathered in the school early that morning.

The DA believed the list was accurate. Bodelson didn't want to take a chance.

"I have to be positive," she said.

And that meant time.

Thomas didn't think time was an option. He'd seen the shocked, confused faces of parents who hadn't found their children. And he could not keep those families waiting in fear.

So he and Bodelson agreed to disagree.

"Do what you think you have to do," she told him.

Thomas knew what to do because he'd been where these families now stood.

Three years earlier, his wife's sister had been murdered by her husband. Thomas and his wife, Shirley, brought their young niece into their home to raise as their own.

So Thomas headed to Leawood, where he found Bob Curnow, who knew all he needed from the expression on the prosecutor's face.

Later, after driving to the home of Michael and Vonda Shoels to tell them their son was dead, Thomas returned to Columbine and his moment alone with Matt Kechter.

For more than a day, ATF agent Motte, 39, waited impatiently to learn the makes, models and serial numbers of the four guns carried by Harris and Klebold.

At dusk Wednesday, as a chill wind brought sleet and then snow, an evidence technician handed him a slip of paper with the names and numbers he needed.

The killers had carried two aging shotguns, a Savage model 67H pump and a Savage model 311D double-barrel, both roughly 30 years old.

Motte knew these would be trouble -- before 1968, gun manufacturers weren't required to stamp serial numbers on weapons, making it nearly impossible to trace them. After so much time, the guns could have passed through many owners before ending up in the hands of two teen-age killers.

But Motte also caught a break. The two other weapons, a 10-shot Hi-Point model 995 carbine rifle and an Intratec TEC DC-9 semiautomatic pistol, were relatively new.

Motte called ATF headquarters and asked for an "urgent trace" on each of the four weapons.

Within an hour, the phone rang in Charlie Brown's Ohio home. Brown, vice president of a Dayton gun distributorship that sells Hi-Point weapons, was asked to look for records on the carbine.

Brown drove to his office and quickly found the paperwork. He faxed the records to the ATF agents.

Manufactured in August 1998, the carbine had gone to Brown's company, then was shipped to a dealer in Selma, Ala. It finally was sold at a Longmont gun shop.

The 1994 TEC DC-9 had gone to an Illinois sporting goods shop, then to a Colorado gun dealer. It eventually was sold at the Tanner Gun Show, held regularly at the Denver Merchandise Mart.

The shotguns proved as difficult to trace as Motte feared. The manufacturer had gone out of business, and he got no further than the original retail sale of each weapon.

It was after midnight Wednesday when Thomas walked back through his front door. In all his years as a prosecutor, in all the sad stories and ruined lives he'd encountered, he'd never completely lost control of his emotions.

Until now.

"Why did this happen?" he screamed hysterically, tears pouring down his cheeks.

His wife, a federal treasury agent, tried to comfort him.

"These children did not deserve to die," he wailed. "This is so unfair."