

Echoes of Columbine pain

By Jim Hughes
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Mar. 7, 2001 - SANTEE, Calif. - Classmates Chelsey Akenson and Amrah Brunt walked through the rain Tuesday to Santana High School to lay small ribbon-wrapped wreaths at a Clement Park-style memorial to victims of the nation's latest school shooting.

Almost two years ago in Jefferson County, thousands of mourners streamed into Clement Park to leave flowers, teddy bears and poems wrapped in Columbine High's blue-and-silver school colors. The skies opened then, too.

Here in normally sunny Southern California, it was purple bleeding into yellow under periodic torrents as another American community contemplated the aftermath of a murderous rampage in one of its schools. There were two killed instead of 13. There was one teenage assailant seeking revenge for being bullied instead of two, and he was captured alive. But the pain seemed to be the same, by the look of the puffy, red-eyed faces coming to pray, to leave remembrances and words of hope in the rain and to see their school still standing, even after this.

Many here described the short but deadly attack by 15-year-old freshman Charles "Andy" Williams on Monday as something that happened despite all the lessons learned from Columbine.

Despite the "Peace Clubs" formed since April 20, 1999, across the Grossmont Union High School District.

Despite the heightened vigilance of school administrators and the no-tolerance treatment of kids who brought weapons to school.

Teachers and students here talked about what happened at Columbine for weeks after it happened, said Akenson, a 17-year-old Santana junior.

Officials revamped each school's crisis-response strategy. More campus supervisors were hired.

But still, America's dark and recurring problem surfaced here, shattering the innocence of yet another community.

"Columbine is Columbine," one flummoxed talk-radio host said Tuesday morning, "but Santana High School is down the street."

"They did everything they possibly could to prevent this," said Akenson's mother, Shelley Drive. "So people who think it can't happen, rich or poor - it still can happen."

And if it hadn't been for the quick response of two San Diego County sheriff's deputies - aided by an off-duty San Diego city police officer who happened to be at Santana to register his child for classes - Williams' rampage could well have reached Columbine proportions, officials said Tuesday.

After they arrested Williams, deputies found eight rounds loaded in his .22-caliber revolver and the hammer cocked.

"As bad as it was, it had the potential for being worse," San Diego County Sheriff Bill Kolender said. "If they had not been as quick as they were, I'm sure other people would have been wounded or killed." That speedy intervention was far different from the police response to Columbine High School, where students Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris committed suicide after killing a teacher and 12 classmates in the nation's deadliest school shooting.

Not knowing the extent of the threat they faced, law officers at Columbine sealed off the area before entering the school, a timeconsuming process that has been widely criticized and is the subject of several lawsuits. It took 3 1/2 hours before officers reached teacher Dave Sanders, who later died of his gunshot wounds. At Santana High, officers quickly entered the school.

While Harris and Klebold were long dead when officers reached the Columbine library, the officers here interrupted Williams in midrampage.

"The suspect was in the bathroom with his weapon in his hands," said San Diego sheriff's Lt. Jerry Lewis. "They drew down on him and ordered him to drop his weapon," which he did. "I don't know if they were heroic or crazy," another police official said.

But while critics of the Columbine police response say a speedier entry could have saved lives, Kolender called Columbine more complicated, more difficult to contain, than Monday's shooting.

There were two gunmen with four guns and 90 bombs at Columbine. At Santana, there was a single shooter with a single handgun.

Officers headed to Columbine also were caught in major traffic snarls. That wasn't the case in Santee. Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone agreed with Kolender's assessment: The responses were different because the incidents were different.

"What happened down there was a different situation," Stone said. "The officers did not encounter gunfire, they weren't being shot at, they weren't dealing with a building that was on fire, the bomb element was not in there and the information that we were getting was that we had six to eight shooters."

On the prevention front, local officials here have done all they can since Columbine to defuse schoolyard tensions and to discourage violence, said Diane Jacob, county supervisor for the eastern part of San Diego County.

After Columbine, thousands of students in San Diego County underwent anti-violence education, and millions of dollars were spent on after-school programs for "atrisk" students, she said.

School officials have met with juvenile-court judges and probation officers to determine how best to pre-empt violence, she said.

"But it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to prevent this tragedy, and I frankly don't know if anything could have prevented it," she said. "None of us will ever know. But of all the anti-violence training, the one most crucial violence prevention is a strong family. We can have all the programs in the world ... but there's nothing that takes the place of a strong family." Because of the relatively uncomplicated crime scene at Santana, investigators finished collecting evidence Tuesday.

Whereas Harris and Klebold rampaged across several areas of Columbine High School, Williams was restricted primarily to a bathroom and the area immediately outside of that bathroom.

There were fewer shots fired, fewer victims - Harris and Klebold also wounded two dozen people - and therefore less evidence to gather, Kolender said.

While there were several bullet "strike marks" left in the area of the attack, there was nothing like the damage at Columbine High School, which closed for the remainder of the school year after the attack.

The Santana campus was opened to the public Tuesday evening, and students were slated to return this morning for schoolwide counseling.