

# Across America, Grief and Horror

*By Valerie Strauss*

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, April 22, 1999

Sharon Blorstad got out of bed yesterday morning after a night rendered sleepless by horror. She sent her 7-year-old off to Howard County's Elkridge Elementary School with an extra hug and decided that being angry wasn't enough anymore.

After watching the heartbreaking images of parents in Colorado grieving for children caught in the worst shooting in a school in American history, she knew she had to act.

"I am so sick of this world being so screwed up," the legal secretary, who works at the Washington-based law firm of Muldoon, Murphy & Faucette, said yesterday. "When I was a kid, these things didn't happen. Now I'm going to see what I can do to help control guns."

Blorstad's horrified reaction was echoed by people in stores and schools and on street corners across the Washington area and the rest of the country. Suppressed fears about the safety of children were pricked open anew by tragedy.

And this time, it felt even worse. The numbers killed were horrifying, but so were the tales of killers who taunted their young victims before blasting their lives away. And because of television, people could watch events unfold, could watch the terrified teenagers running away from their school.

How do teenagers get sawed-off shotguns? adults asked yesterday. Why is information about how to make a bomb on the Internet? What can be done?

When television personality Rosie O'Donnell called for gun control on a morning talk show, Blorstad sent an e-mail to O'Donnell and called her members of Congress.

"Mothers started Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and they took it federal, and it's going to take mothers to do this," she said. "It took me 10 years to get my son. He's adopted. I love him, and nobody is going to come into his school and kill him. . . . It's so easy to look at your TV and say this is horrible. I'm going to do what I can."

At shops and offices, customers and employees talked of little else. At Richard Montgomery High School, classes were devoted to discussing how to prevent further tragedies. Even at the Pentagon, the topic of conversation was not the U.S. bombs dropping on Yugoslavia but the Littleton shootings.

Flags flew at half-staff in Washington. President Clinton, at a ceremony honoring White House volunteers, paused for a moment of silence. The House of Representatives did the same thing, as did the Chicago Board of Trade, where the usual din gave way to a brief time of quiet broken only by the ringing of unattended telephones.

"I don't ever remember doing this before outside of the annual one minute's silence during Armistice Day on Nov. 11," said Chicago trader Vic Lespinasse, of AG Edwards.

In the faraway tragedy, people found confirmation of their worst fears about American culture.

At Howard University, students talked about early reports that the Littleton killers may have been targeting African Americans.

"How much is really changing in society if teenage boys are going out of their way to make bombs and target African Americans?" asked Esigie Aguele, a 24-year-old senior. She wondered how the young killers obtained information about bombmaking on the Internet.

"It's costing lives, this freedom of information," she said.

The Washington-based Handgun Control group received hundreds of calls from across the country after O'Donnell gave out the phone number to a nationwide television audience. One call came from a 13-year-old girl who wanted to know how to start an anti-gun group in her school. A Handgun Control veteran said she could not remember a busier day.

The National Rifle Association had a busy day, too. After the killings, officials said they were scaling back their annual convention scheduled for next week in Denver.

On Tuesday, 16-year-old Marissa Courey watched television in disbelief. She finally decided the coverage was too much when she saw SWAT team members snatching a boy through a school window. His face, she said, had been partially blown off.

"That really got me," she said. "That shouldn't have been on."

For her and her friends at Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda, yesterday was dominated both in and out of class by talk of how to prevent the next tragedy.

Nina Carroll-Gilmore, owner of the Alexandria Floral Shop, watched television Tuesday night and wept at the sight of parents grieving for their children. Her husband, she said, spent the evening railing about the NRA.

Yesterday in her shop, customers kept asking how teenagers could kill other teenagers.

"We have had other shootings, but we're so shocked about this one because of the numbers killed," she said. "You think we'd get hardened to this, but we don't." She hoped, she said, that the shooting will propel school administrators to be tougher on security.

"The things we assumed," she said, "are evidently no longer true."