

# The Columbine Tapes

By Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche Sunday, Dec. 12, 1999



KEVIN HIGLEY--AP

One Bloody Day: Students evacuating Columbine's campus after Harris and Klebold's rampage last April

The natural born killers waited until the parents were asleep upstairs before heading down to the basement to put on their show. The first videotape is almost unbearable to watch.

Dylan Klebold sits in the tan La-Z-Boy, chewing on a toothpick. Eric Harris adjusts his video camera a few feet away, then settles into his chair with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a sawed-off shotgun in his lap. He calls it Arlene, after a favorite character in the gory Doom video games and books that he likes so much. He takes a small swig. The whiskey stings, but he tries to hide it, like a small child playing grownup. These videos, they predict, will be shown all around the world one day--once they have produced their masterpiece and everyone wants to know how, and why.

Above all, they want to be seen as originals. "Do not think we're trying to copy anyone," Harris warns, recalling the school shootings in Oregon and Kentucky. They had the idea long ago, "before the first one ever happened."

And their plan is better, "not like those f\_\_\_\_\_s in Kentucky with camouflage and .22s. Those kids were only trying to be accepted by others."

Harris and Klebold have an inventory of their ecumenical hatred: all "niggers, spics, Jews, gays, f\_\_\_\_\_ing whites," the enemies who abused them and the friends who didn't do enough to defend them. But it will all be over soon. "I hope we kill 250 of you," Klebold says. He thinks it will be the most "nerve-racking 15 minutes of my life, after the bombs are set and we're waiting to charge through the school. Seconds will be like hours. I can't wait. I'll be shaking like a leaf."

"It's going to be like f\_\_\_\_\_ing Doom," Harris says. "Tick, tick, tick, tick... Haa! That f\_\_\_\_\_ing shotgun is straight out of Doom!"

How easy it has been to fool everyone, as they staged their dress rehearsals, gathered their props--the shotguns in their gym bags, the pipe bombs in the closet. Klebold recounts for the camera the time his parents walked in on him when he was trying on his black leather trench coat, with his sawed-off shotgun hidden underneath: "They didn't even know it was there." Once, Harris recalls, his mother saw him carrying a gym bag with a gun handle sticking out of the zipper. She assumed it was his BB gun. Every day Klebold and Harris went to school, sat in class, had lunch with their schoolmates, worked with their teachers and plotted their slaughter. People fell for every lie. "I could convince them that I'm going to climb Mount Everest, or I have a twin brother growing out of my back," says Harris. "I can make you believe anything."

Even when it is over, they promise, it will not be over. In memory and nightmares, they hope to live forever. "We're going to kick-start a revolution," Harris says--a revolution of the dispossessed. They talk about being ghosts who will haunt the survivors--"create flashbacks from what we do," Harris promises, "and drive them insane."

It is getting late now. Harris looks at his watch. He says the time is 1:28 a.m. March 15. Klebold says people will note the date and time when watching it. And he knows what his parents will be thinking. "If only we could have reached them sooner or found this tape," he predicts they will say. "If only we would have searched their room," says Harris. "If only we would have asked the right questions."

Since then, we've never stopped asking, of course, in our aching effort to get back on our feet, slowly, carefully, only to be pushed back down again. And what if the answers turn out to be different from what we've heard all along? A six-week TIME investigation of the Columbine case tracked the efforts of the police and FBI, who are still sorting through some 10,000 pieces of evidence, 5,000 leads, the boys' journals and websites and the five secret home videos they made in the weeks before the massacre. Within the next few weeks, the investigators are expected to issue their report, and their findings are bound to surprise a town, and a country, that has heard all about the culture of cruelty, the bullying jocks, and has concluded that two ugly, angry boys just snapped, and fired back.

It turns out there is much more to the story than that.

Why, if their motive was rage at the athletes who taunted them, didn't they take their guns and bombs to the locker room? Because retaliation against specific people was not the point. Because this may have been about celebrity as much as cruelty. "They wanted to be famous," concludes FBI agent

Mark Holstlaw. "And they are. They're infamous." It used to be said that living well is the best revenge; for these two, it was to kill and die in spectacular fashion.

This is not to say the humiliation Harris and Klebold felt was not a cause. Because they were steeped in violence and drained of mercy, they could accomplish everything at once: payback to those who hurt them, and glory, the creation of a cult, for all those who have suffered and been cast out. They wanted movies made of their story, which they had carefully laced with "a lot of foreshadowing and dramatic irony," as Harris put it. There was that poem he wrote, imagining himself as a bullet. "Directors will be fighting over this story," Klebold said--and the boys chewed over which could be trusted with the script: Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino. "You have two individuals who wanted to immortalize themselves," says Holstlaw. "They wanted to be martyrs and to document everything they were doing."

These boys had read their Shakespeare: "Good wombs hath borne bad sons," Harris quoted from *The Tempest*, as he reflected on how his rampage would ruin his parents' lives. The boys knew that once they staged their final act, the audience would be desperate for meaning. And so they provided their own poisonous chorus, about why they hated so many people so much. In the weeks before what they called their Judgment Day, they sat in their basement and made their haunting videos--detailing their plans, their motives, even their regrets--which Harris left in his bedroom for the police and his parents to find when it was all over.

The dilemma for many families at Columbine is ours as well. For months they have searched for answers. "It's not going to bring anything or anybody back," says Mike Kirklin, whose son survived a shot in the face. "But we do need to know. Why did they do this?" Still, the last thing the survivors want is to see these boys on the cover of another magazine, back in the headlines, on the evening news. We need to understand them, but we don't want to look at them. And yet there is no escaping this story. Last week another child shot up another school, this time an Oklahoma junior high where four were injured, and all the questions came gushing out one more time.

At Columbine, some wounds are slow to heal. The old library is walled off, while the victims' families try to raise the money to replace it by building a new one. The students still have trouble with fire drills. Some report that kids are drinking more heavily now, saying more prayers, seeing more counselors--550 visits so far this year. Two dozen students are homebound, unable, whether physically or emotionally, to come back to class yet. Tour-bus groups have changed their routes to stop at the high school, and stare.

Some people have found a way to forgive: even parents who lost their beloved children; even kids who won't ever walk again, or speak clearly, or grow old together with a sister who died on the school lawn. But other survivors are still on a journey, through dark places of anger and suspicion, aimed at a government they fear wants to cover up the misjudgments of police; at a school that wants to shift blame; at the killers' parents, who have stated their regrets in written statements issued through their lawyers but who still aren't saying much and who surely, surely had to know something.

It's easy now to see the signs: how a video-game joystick turned Harris into a better marksman, like a golfer who watches Tiger Woods videos; how he decided to stop taking his Luvox, to let his anger flare, undiluted by medication. How Klebold's violent essays for English class were like skywriting his intent. If only the parents had looked in the middle drawer of Harris' desk, they would have found the four windup clocks that he later used as timing devices. Check the duffel bag in the closet; the pipe bombs are inside. In his CD collection, they would have found a recording that meant so much to him that he willed it to a girl in his last videotaped suicide message. The name of the album? Bombthreat Before She Blows.

The problem is that until April 20, nobody was looking. And Harris and Klebold knew it.

### **The Basement Tapes**

The tapes were meant to be their final word, to all those who had picked on them over the years, and to everyone who would come up with a theory about their inner demons. It is clear listening to them that Harris and Klebold were not just having trouble with what their counselors called "anger management." They fed the anger, fueled it, so the fury could take hold, because they knew they would need it to do what they had set out to do. "More rage. More rage," Harris says. "Keep building it on," he says, motioning with his hands for emphasis.

Harris recalls how he moved around so much with his military family and always had to start over, "at the bottom of the ladder." People continually made fun of him--"my face, my hair, my shirts." As for Klebold, "If you could see all the anger I've stored over the past four f\_\_\_ing years..." he says. His brother Byron was popular and athletic and constantly "ripped" on him, as did the brother's friends. Except for his parents, Klebold says, his extended family treated him like the runt of the litter. "You made me what I am," he said. "You added to the rage." As far back as the Foothills Day Care center, he hated the "stuck-up" kids he felt hated him. "Being shy didn't help," he admits. "I'm going to kill you all. You've been giving us s\_\_\_ for years."

Klebold and Harris were completely soaked in violence: in movies like *Reservoir Dogs*; in gory video games that they tailored to their imaginations. Harris liked to call himself "Reb," short for rebel. Klebold's nickname was VoDKa (his favorite liquor, with the capital DK for his initials). On pipe bombs used in the massacre he wrote "VoDKa Vengeance."

That they were aiming for 250 dead shows that their motives went far beyond targeting the people who teased them. They planned it very carefully: when they would strike, where they would put the bombs, whether the fire sprinklers would snuff out their fuses. They could hardly wait. Harris picks up the shotgun and makes shooting noises. "Isn't it fun to get the respect that we're going to deserve?" he asks.

The tapes are a cloudy window on their moral order. They defend the friends who bought the guns for them, who Harris and Klebold say knew nothing of their intentions--as though they are concerned that innocent people not be blamed for their massacre of innocent people. If they hadn't got the guns where they did, Harris says, "we would have found something else."

They had many chances to turn back--and many chances to get caught. They "came close" one day, when an employee of Green Mountain Guns called Harris' house and his father answered the phone. "Hey, your clips are in," the clerk said. His father replied that he hadn't ordered any clips and, as Harris retells it, didn't ask whether the clerk had dialed the right number. If either one had asked just one question, says Harris, "we would've been f\_\_\_\_ed."

"We wouldn't be able to do what we're going to do," Klebold adds.

### **The Warning Signs**

You could fill a good-size room with the people whose lives have been twisted into ropes of guilt by the events leading up to that awful day, and by the day itself. The teachers who read the essays but didn't hear the warnings, the cops who were tipped to Harris' poisonous website but didn't act on it, the judge and youth-services counselor who put the boys through a year of community service after they broke into a van and then concluded that they had been rehabilitated. Because so many people are being blamed and threatened with lawsuits, there are all kinds of public explanations designed to diffuse and defend. But there are private conversations going on as well, within the families, among the cops, in the teachers' lounge, where people are asking themselves what they could have done differently. Neil Gardner, the deputy assigned to the school who traded gunfire with Harris, says he wishes he could have done more. But with the criticism, he has learned, "you're not a hero unless you die."

Nearly everyone who ever knew Harris or Klebold has asked himself the same question: How could we have been duped? Yet the boys were not loners; they had a circle of friends. Harris played soccer (until the fall of 1998), and Klebold was in the drama club. Just the week before the rampage, the boys had to write a poem for an English class. Harris wrote about stopping the hate and loving the world. Klebold went to the prom the weekend before the slaughter; Harris couldn't get a date but joined him at the postprom parties, to celebrate with students they were planning to kill.

To adults, Klebold had always come across as the bashful, nervous type who could not lie very well. Yet he managed to keep his dark side a secret. "People have no clue," Klebold says on one videotape. But they should have had. And this is one of the most painful parts of the puzzle, to look back and see the flashing red lights--especially regarding Harris--that no one paid attention to. No one except, perhaps, the Brown family.

Brooks Brown became notorious after the massacre because certain police officers let slip rumors that he might have somehow been involved. And indeed he was--but not in the way the police were suggesting. Brown and Harris had had an argument back in 1998, and Harris had threatened Brown; Klebold also told him that he should read Harris' website on AOL, and he gave Brooks the Web address.

And there it all was: the dimensions and nicknames of his pipe bombs. The targets of his wrath. The meaning of his life. "I'm coming for EVERYONE soon and I WILL be armed to the f\_\_\_ing teeth and I WILL shoot to kill." He rails against the people of Denver, "with their rich snobby attitude thinkin they are all high and mighty...God, I can't wait til I can kill you people. Feel no remorse, no sense of shame. I don't care if I live or die in the shoot-out. All I want to do is kill and injure as many of you as I can, especially a few people. Like Brooks Brown."

The Browns didn't know what to do. "We were talking about our son's life," says Judy Brown. She and her husband argued heatedly. Randy Brown wanted to call Harris' father. But Judy didn't think the father would do anything; he hadn't disciplined his son for throwing an ice ball at the Browns' car. Randy considered anonymously faxing printouts from the website to Harris' father at work, but Judy thought it might only provoke Harris to violence.

Though she had been friends with Susan Klebold for years, Judy hesitated to call and tell her what was said on the website, which included details of Eric and Dylan's making bombs together. In the end, the Browns decided to call the sheriff's office. On the night of March 18, a deputy came to their house. They gave him printouts of the website, and he wrote a report for what he labeled a

"suspicious incident." The Browns provided names and addresses for both Harris and Klebold, but they say they told the deputy that they did not want Harris to know their son had reported him.

A week or so later, Judy called the sheriff's office to find out what had become of their complaint. The detective she spoke with seemed uninterested; he even apologized for being so callous because he had seen so much crime. Mrs. Brown persisted, and she and her husband met with detectives on March 31. Members of the bomb squad helpfully showed them what a pipe bomb looked like--in case one turned up in their mailbox.

The police already had a file on the boys, it turns out: they had been caught breaking into a van and were about to be sentenced. But somehow the new complaint never intersected the first; the Harrises and Klebolds were never told that a new complaint had been leveled at Eric Harris. And as weeks passed, the Browns found it harder to get their calls returned as detectives focused on an unrelated triple homicide. Meanwhile, at the school, Deputy Gardner told the two deans that the police were investigating a boy who was looking up how to make pipe bombs on the Web. But the deans weren't shown the Web page, nor were they given Eric's name.

As more time passed and nothing happened, the Browns' fears eased--though they were troubled when their son started hanging out with Harris again. Then came April 20. As the gunmen entered the school, Harris saw Brown and told him to run away. But when all the smoke had cleared and the bodies counted, the Browns went public with their charge that the police had failed to heed their warnings. And even some cops agree.

"It should have been followed up," says Sheriff Stone, who did not take office until January 1999. "It fell through the cracks," admits John Kiekbusch, the sheriff's division chief in charge of investigations and patrol.

Some people still think Brooks Brown must have been involved. When he goes to the Dairy Queen, the kid at the drive-through recognizes him and locks all the doors and windows. Brown knows it is almost impossible to convince people that the rumors were never true. Like many kids, his life now has its markers: before Columbine and after.

### **The Investigators**

Detective Kate Battan still sees it in her sleep--still sees what she saw that first day in April, when she was chosen to lead the task force that would investigate the massacre. Bullet holes in the banks of blue lockers. Ceiling tiles ajar where kids had scampered to hide in the crawl space. Shoes left behind by kids who literally ran out of them. Dead bodies in the library, where students cowered beneath

tables. One boy died clenching his eyeglasses, and another gripped a pencil as he drew his last breath. Was he writing a goodbye note? Or was he so scared that he forgot he held it? "It was like you walked in and time stopped," says Battan. "These are kids. You can't help but think about what their last few minutes were like."

Long after the bodies had been identified, Battan kept the Polaroids of them in her briefcase. Every morning when starting work, she'd look at them to remind herself whom she was working for.

On the Columbine task force, Battan was known as the Whip. As the lead investigator, she kept 80-plus detectives on track. The task force broke into teams: the pre-bomb team, which took the outside of the school; the library team; the cafeteria team; and the associates team, which investigated Harris' and Klebold's friends, including the so-called Trench Coat Mafia, as possible accomplices.

Rich Price is an FBI special agent assigned to the domestic terrorism squad in Denver, a veteran of Oklahoma City and the Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta. He was in the North Carolina mountains searching for suspected bomber Eric Rudolph on April 20 when he heard about the rampage at Columbine. In TV news footage that afternoon, he saw his Denver-based colleagues on the scene and called his office. He was told to return to Denver ASAP--suddenly two teenage boys had become the target of a domestic-terrorism probe.

Price became head of the cafeteria team, re-creating the morning that hell broke loose. The investigators have talked to the survivors, the teachers, the school authorities; they have reviewed the videotapes from four security cameras placed in the cafeteria, as well as the videos the killers made. And they have walked the school, step by step, trying to re-create 46 minutes that left behind 15 dead bodies and a thousand questions.



PHOTOGRAPH FOR TIME BY  
STEVE LISS  
LEAD INVESTIGATOR: Kate Battan, shown with a model of the high school, heads the police task force

Battan is very clear about her responsibilities. "I work for the victims. When they don't have any more questions, then I feel I've done my job."

It quickly became obvious to the investigators that the assault did not go as the killers had planned. They had wanted to bomb first, then shoot. So they planted three sets of bombs: one set a few miles away, timed to go off first and lure police away from the school; a second set in the cafeteria, to flush terrified students out into the parking lot, where Harris and Klebold would be waiting with their guns to mow them down; and then a third set in their cars, timed to go off once the ambulances and



rescue workers descended, to kill them as well. What actually happened instead was mainly an improvisation.

Just before 11 a.m. they hauled two duffel bags containing propane-tank bombs into the cafeteria. Then they returned to their cars, strapped on their weapons and ammunition, pulled on their black trench coats and settled in to wait.

Judgment Day, as they called it, was to begin at 11:17 a.m. But the bombs didn't go off. After two minutes, they walked toward the school and opened fire, shooting randomly and killing the first two of their 13 victims. And then they headed into the building.

Deputy Gardner was eating his lunch in his patrol car when a janitor called on the radio, saying a girl was down in the parking lot. Gardner drove toward her, heard gunshots and dived behind a Chevy Blazer, trading shots with Harris. "I've got to kill this kid," he kept telling himself. But he was terrified of shooting someone else by accident--and his training instructions directed that he concentrate on guarding the perimeter, so no one could escape.

Patti Nielson, a teacher, had seen Harris and Klebold coming and ran a few steps ahead of them into the library. One kid was doing his math homework on a calculator; another was filling out a college application; another was reading an article in PEOPLE about Brooke Shields' breakup with Andre Agassi. "Get down!" Nielson screamed. She dialed 911 and dropped the phone when the two gunmen came in. And so the police have a tape of everything that happened next.

The 911 dispatcher listening on the open phone line could hear Harris and Klebold laughing as their victims screamed. When Harris found Cassie Bernall, he leaned down. "Peekaboo," he said, and killed her. His shotgun kicked, stunning him and breaking his nose. Blood streamed down his face as he turned to see Brea Pasquale sitting on the floor because she couldn't fit under a table. "Do you want to die today?" he asked her. "No," she quivered. Just then Klebold called to him, which spared her life.

Why hadn't anyone stopped them yet? It was now 11:29; because of the open line, the 911 dispatcher knew for certain--for seven long minutes--that the gunmen were there in the library and were shooting fellow students. At that early stage, though, only about a dozen cops had arrived on the scene, and none of them had protective gear or heavy weapons. They could have charged in with their handguns, but their training, and orders from their commanders, told them to "secure the

perimeter" so the shooters couldn't escape and couldn't pursue the students who had fled. And by the time the trained SWAT units were pulling in, the killers were on the move again.

Leaving the library, Harris and Klebold walked down a flight of stairs to the cafeteria. It was empty, except for 450 book bags and the four students who hid beneath tables. All the killing and the yelling upstairs had made the shooters thirsty. Surveillance cameras recorded them as they drank from cups that fleeing kids had left on tables. Then they went back to work. They were frustrated that the bombs they had left, inside and outside, had not exploded, and they watched out the windows as the police and ambulances and SWAT teams descended on the school.

Most people watching the live television coverage that day saw them too, the nearly 800 police officers who would eventually mass outside the high school. The TV audience saw SWAT-team members who stood for hours outside, while, as far as everyone knew at the time, the gunmen were holding kids hostage inside. For the parents whose children were still trapped, there was no excuse for the wait. "When 500 officers go to a battle zone and not one comes away with a scratch, then something's wrong," charges Dale Todd, whose son Evan was wounded inside the school. "I expected dead officers, crippled officers, disfigured officers--not just children and teachers."

This criticism is "like a punch in the gut," says sheriff's captain Terry Manwaring, who was the SWAT commander that day. "We were prepared to die for those kids."

So why the delay in attacking the gunmen? Chaos played a big part. From the moment of the first report of gunshots at Columbine, SWAT-team members raced in from every direction, some without their equipment, some in jeans and T shirts, just trying to get there quickly. They had only two Plexiglas ballistic shields among them. As Manwaring dressed in his bulletproof gear, he says, he asked several kids to draw on notebook paper whatever they could remember of the layout of the sprawling, 250,000-sq.-ft. school. But the kids were so upset that they were not even sure which way was north.

Through most of the 46 minutes that Harris and Klebold were shooting up the school, police say they couldn't tell where the gunmen were, or how many of them there were. Students and teachers trapped in various parts of the school were flooding 911 dispatchers with calls reporting that the shooters were, simultaneously, inside the cafeteria, the library and the front office. They might have simply followed the sounds of gunfire--except, police say, fire alarms were ringing so loudly that they couldn't hear a gunshot 20 feet away.

So the officers treated the problem as a hostage situation, moving into the school through entrances far from the one where Harris and Klebold entered. The units painstakingly searched each hallway and closet and classroom and crawl space for gunmen, bombs and booby traps. "Every time we came around a corner," says Sergeant Allen Simmons, who led the first four SWAT officers inside, "we didn't know what was waiting for us." They created safe corridors to evacuate the students they found hiding in classrooms. And they moved very slowly and cautiously.

Evan Todd, 16, tells a different story. Wounded in the library, he waited until the killers moved on, and then he fled outside to safety. Evan, who is familiar with guns, says he immediately briefed a dozen police officers. "I described it all to them--the guns they were using, the ammo. I told them they could save lives [of the wounded still in the library if they moved in right away]. They told me to calm down and take my frustrations elsewhere."

At about noon Harris and Klebold returned to the library. All but two wounded kids and four teachers had managed to get out while they were gone. The gunmen fired a few more rounds out the window at cops and medics below. Then Klebold placed one final Molotov cocktail, made from a Frappuccino bottle, on a table. As it sizzled and smoked, Harris shot himself, falling to the floor. When Klebold fired seconds later, his Boston Red Sox cap landed on Harris' leg. They were dead by 12:05 p.m., when the sprinkler turned on, extinguishing what was supposed to be their last bomb.

But the police didn't know any of this. They were still searching, slowly, along corridors and in classrooms. They found two janitors hiding in the meat freezer. Students and teachers had barricaded themselves and refused to open doors, worried that the shooters might be posing as cops.

Upstairs in a science classroom, student Kevin Starkey called 911. Teacher Dave Sanders had been shot running in the upstairs hallway, trying to warn people; he was bleeding badly and needed help fast. But by this time the 911 lines were so flooded with calls that the phone company started disconnecting people--including Starkey. Finally the 911 dispatcher used his personal cell phone and kept a line open to the classroom so he could help guide police there.

Listening to another dispatcher in his earpiece, Sergeant Barry Williams, who was leading a second SWAT team inside, tried to track Sanders down--but he says no one could tell him where the science rooms were. Still, he and his team searched on, looking for a rag that kids said they had tied on the doorknob as a signal.

The team finally found Sanders in a room with 50 or 60 kids. A paramedic went to work, trying to stop the bleeding and get him out to an ambulance. But it had all taken too long. Though Harris and

Klebold had killed themselves three hours earlier, the SWAT team hadn't reached Sanders until close to 3 p.m.

Sanders' daughter Angela often talks to the students who tried to save her dad. "How many of those kids could have lived if they had moved more quickly?" she asks. "This is what I do every day. I sit and ponder, 'What if?'"

The SWAT team members wonder too. By the time they got to the library, they found that the assault on the school was all over. Scattered around the library was "a sea of bombs" that had not exploded. Trying not to kick anything, the SWAT team members looked for survivors. And then they found the killers, already dead. "We'll never know why they stopped when they did," says Battan.

Given how long the cops took and how much ammunition the killers had, the death toll could have been far worse. But some parents still think it didn't need to have been as high as it was. They pressed Colorado Governor Bill Owens, who has appointed a commission to review Columbine and possibly update SWAT tactics for assailants who are moving and shooting. "There may be times when you just walk through until you find the killers," Owens says. "This is the first time this has happened." The local lawmen "didn't know what they were dealing with."

### **The Parents**

Before the SWAT teams ever found the gunmen's bodies, investigators had already left to search the boys' homes: the kids who had managed to flee had told them whom they should be hunting.

When they knocked on each family's door, it was Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold who answered. By then, news of the assault at Columbine was playing out live on TV. Mr. Harris' first reflex was to call his wife and tell her to come home. And he called his lawyer.

The Klebolds had not been told that their son was definitely involved. They knew his car had been found in the parking lot. They knew witnesses had identified him as a gunman. They knew he was friends with Harris. And they knew he still had not come home, though it was getting late. Mr. Klebold said they had to face the facts. But neither he nor his wife was ready to accept the ugly truth, and they couldn't believe it was happening. "This is real," Mr. Klebold kept saying, as if he had to convince himself. "He's involved."

Within 10 days, the Klebolds sat down with investigators and began to answer their questions. It would be months before the same interviews would take place with the Harrises, who were seeking immunity from prosecution. District Attorney David Thomas says he has not ruled out charges. But

at this point, he lacks sufficient evidence of any wrongdoing. And he is not sure whether charging the parents would do any good. "Could I really do anything to punish them anymore?"

Sheriff Stone questioned the Harrises himself. "You want to go after them. How could they not know?" says Stone. "Then you realize they are no different from the rest of us."

Still, of all the unresolved issues about who knew what, the most serious involves Mr. Harris. Investigators have heard from former Columbine student Nathan Dykeman that Mr. Harris may once have found a pipe bomb. Nathan claims Eric Harris told him that his dad took him out and they detonated it together. Nathan is a problematic witness, partly because he accepted money from tabloids after the massacre. His story also amounts to hearsay because it is based on something Harris supposedly said. Investigators have not been able to ask Mr. Harris about it either; the Harrises' lawyer put that kind of question off limits as a condition for their sitting down with investigators at all.

As for the Klebolds, Kate Battan and her sergeant, Randy West, were convinced after their interviews that the parents were fooled like everyone else. "They were not absentee parents. They're normal people who seem to care for their children and were involved in their life," says Battan. They too have suffered a terrible loss, both of a child and of their trust in their instincts. On what would have been Klebold's 18th birthday recently, Susan Klebold baked him a cake. "They don't have victims' advocates to help them through this," Battan says. They do, however, have a band of devoted friends, and see one or more of them almost every day. In private, the Klebolds try to recall every interaction they had with the son they now realize they never knew: the talks, the car rides, the times they grounded him for something minor. "She wants to know all of it," a friend says of Mrs. Klebold.

Many of the victims' parents wish they could talk to the Klebolds and Harrises, parent to parent. Donna Taylor is caring for her son Mark, 16, who took six 9-mm rounds and spent 39 days in the hospital. She has tried to make contact. "We just want to know," she explains. "From Day One, I wanted to meet and talk with them. I mean, maybe they did watch their boys, and we're not hearing their story."

Throughout the videotapes, it seems as though the only people about whom the killers felt remorse were their parents. "It f\_\_\_ing sucks to do this to them," Harris says of his parents. "They're going to be put through hell once we do this." And then he speaks directly to them. "There's nothing you guys could've done to prevent this," he says.

Klebold tells his mom and dad they have been "great parents" who taught him "self-awareness, self-reliance...I always appreciated that." He adds, "I'm sorry I have so much rage."

At one point Harris gets very quiet. His parents have probably noticed that he's become distant, withdrawn lately--but it's been for their own good. "I don't want to spend any more time with them," he says. "I wish they were out of town so I didn't have to look at them and bond more."

Over the months, the police have kept the school apprised of the progress of their investigation: principal Frank DeAngelis has not seen the videotapes, but the evidence that the boys were motivated by many things has prompted some at the school to quietly claim vindication. The charge was that Columbine's social climate was somehow so rancid, the abuse by the school's athletes so relentless, that it drove these boys to murder. The police investigation provides the school with its best defense. "There is nowhere in any of the sheriff's or school's investigation of what happened that shows this was caused by jock culture," says county school spokesman Rick Kaufman. "Both Harris and Klebold dished out as much ribbing as they received. They wanted to become cult heroes. They wanted to make a statement."

That's an overstatement, and it begs the question of why the boys wanted to make such an obscene statement. But many students and faculty were horrified by the way their school was portrayed after the massacre and have tried for the past eight months to correct the record. "I have asked students on occasion," says DeAngelis, "'The things you've read in the paper--is that happening? Am I just naive?' And they've said, 'Mr. DeAngelis, we don't see it.'"

Maybe they saw the kids who flicked the ketchup packets or tossed the bottles at the trench-coat kids in the cafeteria. But things never got out of hand, they say. Evan Todd, the 255-lb. defensive lineman who was wounded in the library, describes the climate this way: "Columbine is a clean, good place except for those rejects," Todd says of Klebold and Harris and their friends. "Most kids didn't want them there. They were into witchcraft. They were into voodoo dolls. Sure, we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos, grabbing each other's private parts. If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos, and when they did something sick, we'd tell them, 'You're sick and that's wrong.'"

Others agree that the whole social-cruelty angle was overblown--just like the notion that the Trench Coat Mafia was some kind of gang, which it never was. Steven Meier, an English teacher and adviser to the school newspaper, says, "I think these kids wanted to do something that they could be famous

for. Other people tend to wait until they graduate and try to make their mark in the working world and try to be famous in a positive way. I think these kids had a dismal view of life and of their own mortality. To just focus on the bullying aspect is just to focus on one small piece of the entire picture." Meier points out that Harris' brother, from all accounts, is a great kid. "Why would a family have one good son and one bad son?" asks Meier. "Why is it that some people turn out to be rotten?"

The killers made their last videotape on the morning of the massacre. This is the only tape the Klebolds have seen; the Harrises have seen none of them. First Harris holds the camera while Klebold speaks. As the camera zooms in tight, Klebold is wearing a Boston Red Sox cap, turned backward. "It's a half-hour before our Judgment Day," Klebold says into the camera. He wants to tell his parents goodbye. "I didn't like life very much," he says. "Just know I'm going to a better place than here," he says.

He takes the camera from Harris, who begins his quick goodbye. "I know my mom and dad will be in shock and disbelief," he says. "I can't help it."

Klebold interrupts. "It's what we had to do," he says. Then they list some favorite CDs and other belongings that they want to will to certain friends. Klebold snaps his fingers for Harris to hurry up. Time's running out.

"That's it," concludes Harris, very succinctly. "Sorry. Goodbye."

--With reporting by Andrew Goldstein, Maureen Harrington and Richard Woodbury/Littleton