

'I Feel Great,' Colo. Survivor Says

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Lance Kirklin strolled out of the cafeteria to sneak a smoke with two friends at Columbine High School when two shadows appeared about 50 feet away.

Within seconds, there was gunfire. More than a half-dozen bullets fired from a shotgun, a rifle and a TEC-DC 9 handgun pierced the three boys from head to toe. When it ended, one youth was dead, and Kirklin, who initially thought it was a senior prank, and another boy were injured.

As Kirklin lay on the ground, blood oozed from his leg and the left side of his face, part of which had been shattered by the shotgun blast. The triggermen said nothing and moved on to their next victims.

The three were among the first casualties of last month's shooting massacre at the school, which claimed 15 lives, including the two gunmen. Kirklin is among five students still hospitalized. He appeared publicly today for the first time since the April 20 rampage.

"I thought it was a dream," Kirklin, 16, said at a news conference at Denver Health Medical Center.

Joined by his parents, Michael and Dawn, and his three doctors, Kirklin relived the chilling moments that changed his life.

Wearing a gray, oversized Littleton Fire Department T-shirt and baggy green shorts, Kirklin walked slowly with the help of crutches and sat in a chair cushioned with two bed pillows.

"I feel great," he said, mustering a smile. But "it's hard to get back to normal."

He said he believes he and his two friends were random victims. He said he cannot identify the shooters, although he remained conscious for 10 minutes afterward. A triage nurse held his head until two paramedics rescued him and whisked him to the hospital, where he remained in intensive care for two weeks. His condition has been upgraded to fair.

The most gravely injured survivor, Kirklin was shot in the face, chest, groin, leg and foot. He has undergone nearly 30 hours of surgery, including a tracheotomy and skin grafts to replace the golf-ball-size hole in his jaw.

"I had to learn to walk," a barely audible Kirklin said while placing his right hand on a bandage covering his throat. "It's been real emotional at times."

Since the shooting, Kirklin, a sophomore, has visited regularly with family and friends. He has talked with the paramedics who helped save his life. And Aerosmith, his favorite band, dedicated a recent concert to him.

"Lance took the full force of that blast," said Ernest Moore, chief of surgery and trauma services at DHMC. "His sheer survival is a miracle."

The shotgun blast was at close range, and a 9mm bullet remains lodged behind Kirklin's left knee, Moore said. One of three shotgun pellets also remains in a heart ventricle. A section of his bone and soft tissue in one leg was removed and was attached to the jaw.

Kirklin undergoes physical therapy twice a day and could be released within 10 days. He will have at least six more surgeries for his facial wounds and will continue therapy. So far, his medical bills have topped \$1 million, hospital officials said.

He is still unable to have liquids. When he ignored doctors' orders and tried apple juice, it trickled out through a hole in his lower face.

"He tempted fate," said Stephen Batuello, co-medical and surgical director of otolaryngology at the hospital. "That was a little bit of a setback for him."

Nevertheless, doctors and Kirklin's parents are optimistic that he will return to school in the fall.

"Lance has been a uniquely courageous man," Moore said. "I just can't imagine [him] not being there next fall at Columbine."