

The shadow of Columbine looms over this Jeffco sheriff's race

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WESTWORD

In his nearly thirty years at the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, Jeff Shrader has been involved in just about every public aspect of the agency's operation, from running its jail to supervising investigations to overseeing a \$35 million construction project and the creation of a regional crime lab.

But for some families whose lives were altered by the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, it's his involvement in one not-so-public operation that matters most — especially now that Shrader has announced that he's running to replace term-limited Ted Mink as sheriff next year.

Jefferson County Sheriff's Office

A few days after the attack on the high school by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed thirteen and wounded two dozen others before taking their own lives, a group of top government officials met secretly at Jefferson County Open Space offices. The gathering included then-district attorney Dave Thomas, the county attorney and several members of the JCSO top brass — as well as Shrader, a lieutenant at the time. They were there to discuss what the sheriff's office knew about the teen gunmen before the attack, and how to handle press inquiries about what appeared to be a badly bungled investigation a year earlier of Harris.

As a result of that meeting, on April 30, 1999, JCSO spokesman Steve Davis read a prepared statement at a press conference defending his agency's actions. The statement, which had been drafted by Shrader, contained several glaring omissions, mischaracterizations of fact and outright whoppers. It was the start of a campaign

to mislead the public, discredit critics and deflect lawsuits that would go on for years, until court actions and a grand jury probe uncovered the coverup.

Shrader has always denied any role in the coverup, saying that he simply conveyed information supplied to him by others. But that's not how Randy Brown sees it.

"I will never trust him," says Brown, a longtime critic of the official Columbine investigation. "He placed the interests of the sheriff's department above the families of murdered children and above the truth. Everyone at the meeting did that, and they kept the secret like the cowards I believe they are."

It was Brown and his wife, Judy, who'd contacted the sheriff's office thirteen months before Columbine to file a report on Harris, who had been boasting on his website about blowing up pipe bombs and had threatened to kill the couple's oldest son, Brooks. Harris was already on probation for breaking into a van, and the investigators the Browns spoke with seemed to take seriously the information they provided, including several pages of disturbing rants printed out from Harris's website.

After the massacre, Sheriff John "Stonewall" Stone insisted that there had never really *been* an investigation, supposedly because of a lack of cooperation by the Browns. Stone even went on national television and suggested that Brooks Brown, who'd had a strange encounter with Harris shortly before the attack began, was a potential suspect in the case. At the April 30 press conference, the statement Davis read claimed that the Browns had wanted to remain anonymous and hadn't wanted Harris contacted directly; that Harris's website couldn't be accessed; that investigators hadn't been able to link the claims about detonating pipe bombs to any actual pipe bombs found in the neighborhood; and that the matter hadn't involved the number of meetings with police that the Browns claimed.

All of this was provably untrue. And one of the documents that disproved it had been the focus of the secret meeting a few days before that press conference. It was a two-page affidavit for a warrant to search Harris's house and computer, drafted by JCSO bomb tech Mike Guerra. The affidavit noted that investigators had met with

the Browns and had located pipe bombs exploded in a field that matched those described on the website.

If Guerra's search warrant had been executed, it's possible the attack on Columbine could have been prevented; police would likely have stumbled upon at least some of the weapons and extensive writings about the planned attack that Harris was already assembling in the spring of 1998. But since the ball had been dropped, the folks at the meeting decided to act as if the affidavit had never existed and to downplay the Browns' complaints. Shrader's statement made no mention of the affidavit — which wasn't made public until *60 Minutes* learned of its existence two years later and went to court to get it released, after county officials had failed to provide it in response to numerous open-records requests. (Point of disclosure: I served as a paid consultant to CBS News on the project and was involved in that court battle.)

The coverup was subsequently investigated by a state grand jury under Attorney General Ken Salazar. The grand jury failed to indict anyone, but issued a report expressing some "concern" over the secret meeting, the press conference "omissions" and missing files ("Anatomy of a Coverup," September 30, 2004). Shrader was one of only two law enforcement officers to formally respond to the report, countering that both District Attorney Thomas and the county attorney had told him that Guerra's draft affidavit "was clearly an investigative work in process" and had failed to establish probable cause. By not mentioning it in the statement he wrote, he simply "gave due deference to the conclusions of these officials," he said.

Yet the statement presented at the press conference did more than simply omit mention of the affidavit. Contacted recently about other incorrect assertions made in that document, Shrader explained that he'd been "tasked to helping out" with Columbine matters from his assignment in the detention division and was not as familiar with the underlying issues as others at the meeting.

"It's a long time ago," he says. "I was able to help draft a press release. I don't know what ultimately went out in the press release. I presume there was some executive

level of review. I only took the information that people had said in that meeting and conveyed it in a document. I didn't have time to investigate it."

But anyone who'd read the Guerra affidavit, Brown responds, would know that many of the statements made by Davis and others at the press conference were untrue. "He either knew what was going on and kept secrets," Brown says of Shrader, "or if he didn't know what was going on, he's not smart enough to be sheriff."

Shortly after the Columbine shootings, Shrader was promoted to division chief. He's now in charge of special projects; he's also been involved in forums to address juvenile violence, helped lead the agency's community-outreach and decentralization efforts, and spearheaded development of what he calls a "command accountability model." Dealing with the tragedy of Columbine, he says, has helped to make school safety one of the priorities of his campaign.

"I think we're growing," he says of the sheriff's office. "Our training is better. We're certainly not perfect people. I'm not a perfect individual, but I'm going to work hard."

Several years ago, not long after the grand jury's report was released, Shrader met with Randy Brown to discuss his role in the secret meeting. The two have different recollections of that conversation. Shrader says he was under the impression that any dispute between him and Brown had been resolved.

Brown disagrees. "He was not apologetic," he says. "He made no attempt to understand anything. He's had fourteen years to tell the truth about that meeting and the other meetings. He has remained silent."