

Columbine Students Seek Answers in Their Faith

By SARA RIMER

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Beyond this Denver suburb, public figures from Vice President Al Gore to Gary Bauer, the conservative Republican running for President, have praised Cassie Bernall as a symbol of everything that is right with young people today.

At Columbine High School, Miss Bernall is considered a martyr. In the churches and prayer groups that define life for many people here, Columbine students repeat the story of how on April 20, as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went through the school library shooting classmates, one of them pointed a gun at her and asked whether she believed in God. Miss Bernall, a 17-year-old who had been born again only recently, said yes, and then the gunman killed her.

"She's definitely a hero," said Ben Schumann, 15, a member of the youth group at St. Frances Cabrini, a Roman Catholic church with an evangelical bent. "If I was ever faced with a situation like that, I hope I could do what she did. I love God that much that I would give my life because he gave his life for us."

While Miss Bernall, in death, has become a kind of celebrity -- her mother, Misty Bernall, has a contract to write a book about her daughter's religious conversion -- she was part of a broad Christian community here. Though in many ways her final act might seem extraordinary, in her life in Littleton she was in many ways just another teen-ager active in her church.

In the days after the shooting, as people groped for explanations, much was made of the cliques at Columbine High School. But for all the talk of the jocks, preps and trench coat mafia, it was faith that bound Miss Bernall and many of her peers. They spurned the counselors brought in by their school and instead went to their churches. They proclaimed themselves satisfied with an answer that explained nothing about Columbine or the community around it or American society: They are all in God's hands.

"God gathered up his army of angels and protected as many people as he could," said Sara Martin, a graduating senior who belonged to the youth group at West Bowles Community Church, part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, where Cassie Bernall was a member. "The whole school was meant to blow up. Good always overpowers evil."

The students' comments after the shooting are a vivid reminder of how strong a role religion plays in the lives of people in Colorado and other parts of the country, but they also suggest why evangelical faith is spreading, particularly among the young: In a society that seems unanchored, it provides certainty.

"I totally believe that God always wants the best for us, no matter what," said Matt Bruce, a Columbine sophomore who belongs to the youth group at St. Frances, and who was in the cafeteria when the shooting began. "Was God trying to test us?" he said. "That was never a question."

"I feel like there were thousands of angels in there protecting people, helping people," he went on. "A lot of people might feel that God abandoned people. I feel like he came through completely."

Experts say adolescence is a prime time for seeking spiritual meaning along with personal identity. And they say that as many teen-agers rebel, experiment and test widely different beliefs -- Miss Bernall, before being born again, had been dabbling in witchcraft and fighting with her parents, according to her minister, the Rev. George Kirsten -- evangelical churches stand out in their ability to take teen-agers seriously, for themselves.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this generation is in a search mode spiritually," said Greg Laurie, pastor of the Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, Calif., who leads crusades across the country. "So many of them have been raised in an amoral culture, without absolutes, without values, and so the result is that many of them have been searching for meaning and finding it in a relationship with Jesus Christ."

"In our crusades, I very unapologetically declare the Bible as truth. I say, 'Here's how to know God.' They're very responsive to that. They want somebody to just get up there and say, 'Here it is.' "

After the shootings at Columbine, attention focused on a loose group of friends known as the trench coat mafia that sometimes included Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold. Less noticed was Columbine's Bible Club, which has some 70 members who meet weekly at 6:30 A.M.

The Bible Club includes popular students like Miss Martin, one of the speakers at commencement last month. Like Miss Bernall, she said, she made her own spiritual journey recently, joining the Bible Club and the youth group at West Bowles only after dabbling in everything from Catholicism to Zen Buddhism.

"I was kind of two different people," Miss Martin said. "With my friends, I was totally crazy, loud, obnoxious. Talk about lonely: I would go home and say, 'God, I know you're there.' "

Zen Buddhism was "cool," but not for her. "I didn't get why you would want to attain nothingness," she said. "I've always believed in somethingness."

In the fall of 1997 another Columbine student, Craig Nason, invited her to his church, West Bowles, for a concert by Kry, the Christian rock group. "Craig was totally out there," she said. "He was so friendly." She wanted to know Mr. Nason's secret. "When you see someone who has joy -- grounded joy -- you want to know what's going on," she said.

After the concert, Miss Martin participated in an altar call, stepping forward and committing herself to Jesus Christ. "Every other religion I could dip in and out of," she recalled. "This was like, 'boom!' This could change your life."

West Bowles is a member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a small, conservative denomination established in 1981. But it had plenty of kindred spirits. The youth group has 300 members, and half the 1,200 parishioners are under 25.

In step with a generation that a West Bowles spokesman, Charles Moore, described as "more familiar with a talk show format than with religious cathedrals," the church resembles a theater, with seats rather than pews, an orchestra pit and stage area, and a huge screen where videos are shown on Sundays.

Members of the youth group hang out together several evenings a week, studying Scripture, playing Frisbee, volunteering at a halfway house for recovering drug addicts and former prison inmates.

The church, Mr. Moore said, is an antidote to the rootlessness of the sprawling Colorado suburbs. "There is no semblance of community anymore," he said. "It's such a mobile, high-tech culture. That's one of the things we're trying to counter. There is a strong emphasis on relationship building. This becomes the center of their social lives."

With the church as their center, the students find it easier to resist peer pressure to drink, and have sex, they said. "Our love for Christ gets us high," Mr. Nason said.

Evangelical churches like West Bowles "take young people seriously as spiritual seekers," said Brenda Brasher, an associate professor of religion at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio. "They don't try to turn young people into 1950's Christians. They try to meet young people where they are today."

In the aftermath of the shooting, many Columbine students found a refuge in church.

At St. Frances Cabrini, where 2 of the 12 students slain, Daniel Mauser and Matt Kechter, were members, Ben Schumann and the other members of his youth group talked and cried and prayed together.

Gwen Bartlett, a junior, explained why she didn't want to talk to professional counselors. "Counselors just seem to go, 'Uh, huh, I'm sorry,' " she said. "They can't say, 'I won't promise this won't happen again.'

"A bunch of seminarians came down, and talking with the seminarians was a really big help. They just knew what to say. They referred everything back to our faith."

Miss Bartlett and Mr. Schumann and their friends say the shooting has strengthened their faith. But the youth minister at St. Frances, Jim Beckman says others have been deeply shaken. Mr. Beckman said one 16-year-old Columbine student told him: " 'I don't think I can come to church right now.' I told him, 'Hey, dude, you just went through one of the most traumatic experiences of your life. You need to doubt; you need to wrestle.' "

The members of Mr. Beckman's youth group see God's presence clearly in the events of April 20. . "God was with them every step of the way," said Charise Walters, 16, a sophomore. "He chose them for some special reason."

Asked about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the members of the youth group declared that they had forgiven them. "I pray they're in heaven," Miss Walters said.

Abby Chism, 16, said: "It's O.K. It's God's will. I forgive those boys. It's got to be something we do constantly. Otherwise, it will eat us up inside."