

## **Library Survivor Breaks Silence**

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June 12 - Pretzeled inside an old, orange cupboard inside the Columbine High School library, her body bleeding, sweating and shaking and her mind wondering and wandering - a terrified Patti Nielson vividly heard the shots echoed round the world. A few feet away, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were committing conjoint suicide in the early afternoon of April 20 and in the aftermath of the nation's most horrific school shooting spree. But the ordeal wasn't over, and still isn't, for Nielson.

A color-splashed abstract hangs in the powder room of the pristine suburban home shared by Patti and Shane Nielson, their children Josh, 9, Elise, 5, and Mallory, 2, and Cody the dog. Patti, who majored in art at Metro State College before she became a teacher, brush-stroked the painting into life years ago and titled it "On Second Thought." In the middle of the night this week, Nielson woke up with a start. She was having a second thought about the tragedy - again.

Nielson was on duty as a lunch-time monitor in Columbine High School's north hall when she noticed a man in black, with his back to her, outside the school. He apparently was shooting a gun into the parking lot. Her first reaction was that he was involved in the production of a video or in a senior prank. Nielson headed in his direction to tell him to stop "because I thought he was doing a dumb thing." As she reached the door leading outside, he turned and grinned at her. Then, Eric Harris shot her. This was no movie or stunt, she realized. "It was very real." The 35-year-old Nielson - an intelligent, personable woman whom hospital personnel later would mistake for a student - made the first 911 call from Columbine that fateful Tuesday.

She was among the first shooting victims, enduring a frightening 3 hours in the school library - where 10 people were murdered, nine were injured and from which 32 escaped. She was the closest person to the shooters when they died and one of the last survivors to leave the building. When she finally felt free on Pierce Street

outside Columbine late in the afternoon, Nielson noticed a blind boy from school standing alone. Police ordered her to get into an ambulance and go to the hospital. "I can't leave the blind student," she said. The young man turned toward her and said: "I prefer 'visually challenged.'" Nielson smiled for the first time in what seemed like an eternity.

Nielson is one of the most pivotal witnesses to the Columbine shootings. She was deluged by requests for interviews in the early days but was too traumatized and wanted to grieve for the slain students. Now, Nielson feels she can reflect more thoughtfully about April 20. "I have second thoughts about what happened all the time. I can't get it out of my mind. It's there."

Under a job-share, Nielson taught three morning art classes each day. Her last class ended at 11:10 a.m., and she stopped to tell a fellow teacher a joke she had heard on the radio that morning. Normally, Nielson monitored a hall every other Tuesday during second lunch period. But she traded with a colleague and worked both lunch periods. Columbine is a "good school where everybody cares," she said. "We have high test scores, and our athletes do well, but that's not all. We have a great music department and drama department, and our art students have won several awards." The only trouble she had experienced as "hall policeman" was students bringing soft drinks or food from the cafeteria downstairs. "The principal (Frank DeAngelis) wanted to keep the school clean, and it was."

At about 11:20 a.m., Nielson was standing in the hall looking at a multicultural art book she was considering for her classes. Brian Anderson, a junior, lingered nearby. They heard "pops" from the stairs outside the building and saw the man in black through the double glass doors. "What's that?" Nielson said. Anderson replied: "Probably a cap gun. It's probably for video productions." The speculation "made perfect sense to me," Nielson recalled. "Students do little skits and stuff for video class." Nielson and Anderson walked quickly toward the doors "and just as we got to the second set of doors, (the gunman) turned around and looked straight at us. He did not have a mask over his face, but he was wearing some kind of black hat. I thought he was small, but I found out later he was pretty tall. But he was thin and kind of lean," Nielson said. "He smiled at me and pointed the gun." It was a TECDC9 semiautomatic handgun. He fired and Nielson twisted to see a large hole in the glass door. More shots, and Anderson was hit in the chest. Nielson felt

her back burning. "I didn't know what it was, maybe the glass from the door. The second I looked at the kid, (Anderson) he arched and dropped, and I screamed." A bullet grazed Nielson - there are scars streaked across her back - and another stuck in a necklace Anderson wore. "He reached down and plucked it out himself." The teacher pushed the student back inside - "he's 16, and I'm 35, and it was maternal instinct," and they sprinted around a corner into the library. "It was the fastest place to go for help."

If Nielson hadn't been hall monitor, she would have been home with her children when the shootings started. "I couldn't understand why I was there. But there must have been a good reason." The library was full of kids. "I screamed there was a man with a gun, and the kids were looking at me shocked." Nielson didn't know this section of the school well - her class was on the other side of the building. But she knew there was a telephone behind the library's main checkout desk. "I had used the phone several weeks before to call my sister." The librarian was at lunch, and there was no conspicuous adult supervision. Nielson hollered to the students: "Get down. Get under the tables." She grabbed the phone. "We had done fire drills, and I remembered instinctively to call 9 to get an outside line, then 911." Nielson could hear shooting "and whooping it up" beyond the library doors. She knew then that more than one person was involved and they were definitely students. "I have said that it felt like there were more than two, but I cannot account for that. . . . There was adolescent-type shouting," she said. "I don't remember exactly what was said, but it was like kids enjoying themselves and having a great time." The library doors were open and secured in place. Nielson since has had second thoughts about whether she should have tried to lock the doors, but she had no key and the doors had glass windows. Someone trying to get in wouldn't have been deterred. Besides, she knew that a shooter was just behind her and Anderson. While the students huddled beneath tables and behind chairs, a police dispatcher answered Nielson's call. She spoke loudly and unhaltingly, for the benefit of both the dispatcher and the frightened young men and women. "I wanted everyone to know I was serious." "Yes, I'm a teacher at Columbine High School, and there is a student here with a gun. He just shot out a window. I believe . . . " . . . The school is in a panic, and I'm in the library. I've got students down. Kids under the table. My kids are screaming. Under the table, kids. The teachers are trying to take control of things. We need police here." Fire alarms were

blasting. Strobe lights that went on in the library gave it an eerie disco appearance, and smoke wafted in from the hall. Nielson slid under the backside of the checkout desk and continued talking to the woman dispatcher, who told her police, paramedics and firemen were en route. "I could hear shots, and I could hear bombs," she says now. "I felt like we were going to die." Students began peeking over the tables, and Nielson shouted again for them to take cover.

She heard gunmen enter the library and the shooting began. Nielson started to recite The Lord's Prayer. The dispatcher told Nielson to "forget about the Lord's Prayer for the moment and talk to her." She then whispered to the dispatcher: "They're in here. They're killing kids. I need to go now." She left the phone off the hook and crawled beneath the desk, where a stool normally would go. The tapes continued to pick up the havoc in the library for another 20 minutes - until all the victims had been shot. When the line was disconnected, Nielson said, it wasn't from her side. That means authorities have a 26-minute taped record of the siege in the library. Had they not lost the connection, they would have heard what transpired at the end of Harris' and Klebold's lives.

Nielson couldn't see the shooters, but she could hear them. "They were saying the most disgusting, vile things . . . You could tell they were having fun." The two saw a black teenager and called him a racist name. "Then they killed him." The shooters ordered any jocks in the room to stand up. Two who were identified were shot. "But it wasn't just athletes," Nielson said. Harris and Klebold picked out one young man because he wore glasses and accused him of being " "a geek - you think you look cool' " and told another student he was " "pathetic, fat boy.' " "You'd hear them yell something terrible," Nielson said. "Then, boom." When one girl said "Oh God, Oh God," an assassin asked her: "Do you believe in God?" When she said she did, she was shot. But another girl also cried "Oh God, Oh God," and "I didn't hear shots, so I knew she was alive. Every time one of them would say something, I'd hear shots, and I knew kids were dying." Many students believed Nielson had been killed after shots were fired into the desk. Again, though, she was spared - by inches. The two gunmen were "reloading and talking about watching each other's back to keep anyone from jumping them. They were on a power trip," Nielson said. When a student said: "Don't you think you've done enough?" he was shot. A gunman announced: "We're going to blow up the library," Nielson said. The killers "were just gross. There were theatrics involved, and they seemed to be

acting out some war game. One second they were mean, the next they were laughing. I thought they were on illegal drugs, but I guess the autopsies show they were not, which is also kind of bizarre, because you can't believe anyone in their right minds would do this. They were so crazed." At one point a shooter said: "Look at that head blow up. I didn't know brains could fly." Nielson was trying to remain as still as possible while trying to plot something to do. But there wasn't anything anyone could do. "I thought the police would show up at any moment. But they didn't." Police told the Nielsons as many as 100 shots were fired in the library, and at least one pipe bomb exploded. Finally, Nielson heard one of the youths say: "Let's get down to the commons." But the other replied: "I have one more thing to do." One of the pair walked over to where Nielson was hiding. "He stopped in front of me, and I'm thinking I'm dead. His black combat boots, with the pants tucked in, were right by my head. I still don't know if he knew I was there. It was pretty open from that side. But I had no place to run or hide." The gunman grabbed a chair and smashed it atop the desk. At that point, about 10 minutes after they had entered the library, the shots stopped and Klebold and Harris left the room. Nielson didn't dare move. But most of the students who were unharmed or injured ran out of the room and downstairs to an exit.

Nielson was in shock. "I never knew the kids got out." After several minutes of calm in the library - although she could hear shots in the distance - Nielson crawled from behind the desk. "I saw two tennis shoes sticking out from under a table." Everyone seemed dead. The young people were lifeless, and blood was splattered everywhere. Nielson believed she was the only person alive in the library, though she later found out two students had not died. "Everyone else was gone, and there was nothing else I could do."

Inside the library area are several smaller rooms. Nielson crawled around corners and spotted a cupboard under a kitchen sink. She sat on a paint tray, twisted her body into a fetal position and shut the cupboard door as much as she could. "There were no handles on the inside, so I couldn't shut it all the way. There was just a crack of light." She looked at her watch. It was 11:45 a.m. Nielson was certain the gunmen would return at any moment. "I got as quiet as I could and prayed until I couldn't think of anything else to pray about." She could hear shots in the distance - downstairs, it turned out, in the cafeteria - and more pipe bombs detonating. "There was a definite difference between bombs and shots."

From police, Nielson eventually learned that two barbecue grill-sized propane tanks had been lashed together in the commons area, and that Harris and Klebold had fired at them hoping to cause a major explosion. The tanks were beneath the library. Harris and Klebold "couldn't get close to them because they would have been blown up, the officers told me, and they were such bad shots they didn't hit them. If they had, everything might have gone up."

As it was, the cafeteria was 6 inches deep in water from the fire sprinklers, and the alarms continued to blare. "It was so noisy," Nielson said. In her cocoon in the cupboard, Nielson searched for a pencil - in vain. "I wanted to write down a record of what went on, and I wanted to leave my husband a message telling him how much I loved him."

Shane Nielson, whose family-owned chemical laboratory is in Brighton, had learned of the tragedy on TV and took off for Columbine about the time his wife was wedging herself into the cupboard. He got behind a police car and "broke every speed limit," Shane said. "Like a lot of other people, I didn't think it was that serious at first. Then there were reports about people injured." At Leawood Elementary School, Shane Nielson waited with students' parents and teachers' spouses.

Nielson considered coming out of her cubbyhole to call her husband, "but I was afraid they might come back while I was on the phone." So she waited "and started to talk to myself. I thought that Mallory wouldn't remember me if I died. I wanted Josh to get closer to his father and I hoped that Elise would remember the time we spent together before I was gone. "I could hear helicopters up above, and I thought they were probably from the TV stations, and I wondered why the SWAT teams weren't there yet. I thought at any time someone would come in and say "It's all right to come out.' It didn't take that long to get to the school. Then I thought that the gunmen might come in and say it was OK to come out because they were the police, and they'd have me. I was scared to death, and I was thinking about all those students dead in the library."

Her legs and feet went numb, and Nielson tried to reposition her head. "I thought if I had to run, my legs would give out on me. I thought I would have to spend all night in this cupboard, and I was determined not to let it make me go insane." She

believes, because of the sounds she heard, that the gunmen returned to the library briefly, thought that no one was alive, and departed. At one point - Nielson doesn't know when because she couldn't see the time on her watch - she heard glass breaking. She was unsure if the gunmen had returned or if police were shooting out the windows. That was when injured student Patrick Ireland went through the window to safety. Through the crack in the cupboard door Nielson saw two older women who worked as library aides creeping past. She motioned to them, and one said they were going back to an inner room where they had been hiding. Nielson considered joining them, but decided to remain where she was "because then I thought maybe they (Harris and Klebold) would come back to the broadcasting room." For the first time since she hid, Nielson could see her watch. It was 1 p.m.

In the library is a makeshift TV studio - the Rebel News Network - where students taped programs that were televised on a cable channel in the school and nearby neighborhoods. "What if they wanted to go in there and broadcast their demands or just take over and say what they wanted to on TV? So many things were going through my head," Nielson said. Then she knew they were back. Nielson could hear commotion in the library. Followed by a reverberating shot. She feared the library aides had been killed. (They believed she had been killed.) "I didn't hear any conversation, any yelling, just rat-tat-tat." Investigators are convinced that at that time, between 1 and 2 p.m., Harris and Klebold killed themselves - simultaneously.

Over the next few days police and some media outlets claimed that Harris and Klebold were dead within 30 minutes after the shooting started, at approximately noon. "I knew there was no way that was possible," Nielson said. "When I looked at my watch and saw 1 o'clock, they hadn't come back to the library." Harris and Klebold, by her reckoning, were alive well into the afternoon - even though, by then, SWAT members were in the school. There is speculation that police exchanged fire with the two. Nielson constantly heard shots from afar, but police told her they were "laying down ground cover and shooting into the floors." She doesn't question the police tactics, but has "heard that the SWAT team at the building wasn't getting the information that people were dying inside."

At approximately 4 p.m., the library aides approached the cupboard and said to Nielson: "Come out. Come out." Hesitantly, she emerged. At the library door SWAT officers pulled her into the hallway, ordered her to put her hands behind her head and frisked her. She never looked around the library at the dead bodies - and didn't know that Harris and Klebold were among them. Nielson and the other four remaining survivors in the building were told to go down the stairs and out of the building. "I could see hundreds of backpacks scattered everywhere, and at the door there was this backpack we were told to be careful of." She ran into the sunlight, climbed into the back of a police car and was told to duck. "I still didn't feel safe at that point. I could barely see out the window, and we were driving through the park. When we stopped a policeman said to me 'The building is secure.' "I had figured all along - because there were so many dead - that the two shooters would be killed. They had no hostages."

Nielson was taken away in an ambulance because of her back wound. "The paramedic who treated me asked me if I believed in God, and I told him I did. He said it was a good thing because only God could have saved me. The bullet had grazed me. An inch more, and I would have been dead." After being released from the hospital, Nielson went home, hugged and cried with her family, watched the TV accounts of the day and saw that Harris and Klebold had caused all the carnage. Harris was the man in black who shot at her. She remembered his face when he smiled and shot. But she also remembered Klebold. "Several days before this happened, I was walking down the hall, and I saw this boy sitting there, saying nothing. He wore a black trench coat and a beret. I didn't like the way he dressed, but I figured he was just trying to be different, just trying to get attention." That teenager was Klebold. "I guess he got the attention."

When Columbine classes resumed at a neighboring school the next week, Nielson felt it would be therapeutic for her art students to sketch their reflections of the tragedy. "Some were very interesting and insightful," she recalled. Although she is an accomplished artist, Nielson herself has not painted her own memories of the events of April 20. "I may someday, but I'm not ready yet." The ordeal is in her mind, not on canvas, and Patti Nielson continues to have second thoughts.

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