

# Twenty years later: Remembering Columbine

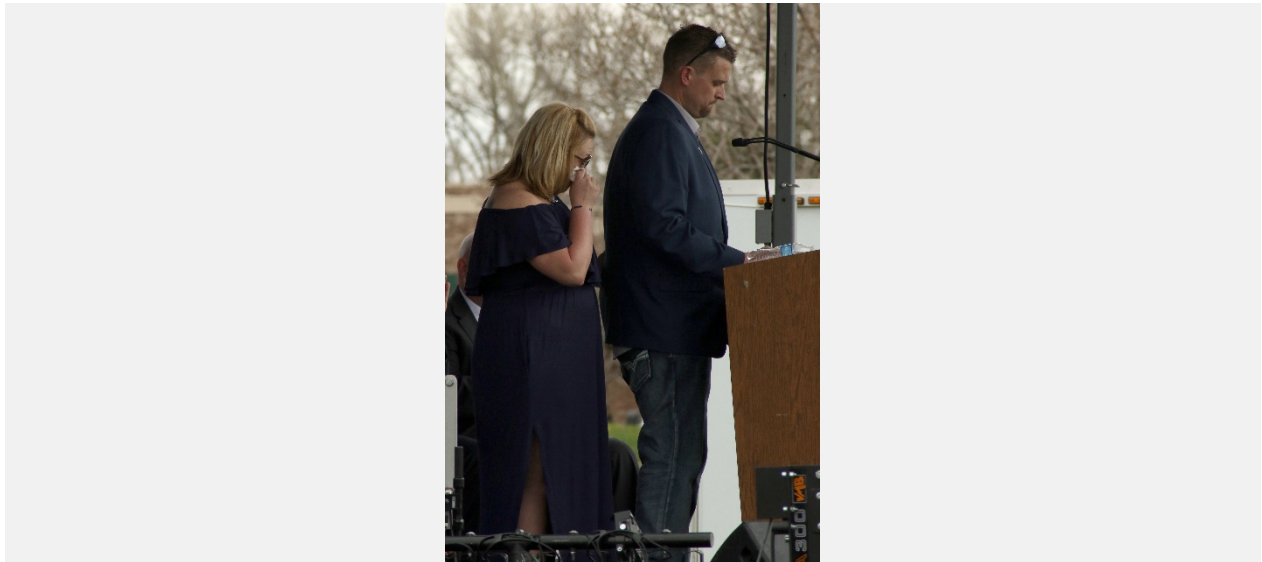
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## Community processes tragedy two decades on

The events that took place on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School left the country stunned. People across the nation watched their televisions as children jumped from the windows and ran away from the building in tears.

The Columbine community gathered at 3 p.m. in Clement Park to remember and honor the 12 children and their gym teacher who lost their lives in the infamous school shooting. The crowd was a mix of children, teenagers and adults. The emotions radiating through the mass of people were a mix of anxiety, sadness, determination and pride.

Current Columbine students were sprinkled throughout the crowd in their dark blue “Remember. Reflect. Recommit” Columbine shirts. They were handing out the service’s program to the crowd, volunteering their time on the day of service.



Columbine shooting survivor Sean Graves, with his wife Kara Graves by his side, delivers a speech at the 20th anniversary memorial in Littleton on April 20. Photo by Madison Lauterbach

Bagpipers from the Queen City Pipe Band crossed the sea of grass between the parted crowd. They were clad in white dress shirts, blue vests and kilts of green and black with brown-black Glengarry hats resting upon their heads, and green boots on their feet.

The pipers and a combined honor guard performed the presentation of the colors just before the Columbine Blue Choir sang the national anthem.

“We all remember where we were on that day,” said Mandy Cooke, who was a student at the time of the shooting, and is now a teacher at Columbine.

She said she was confused during the evacuation, thinking it was due to a fire. Even after she learned that there had been shots fired, she didn’t know the extent of what happened until she found shelter in a stranger’s house.

Sean Graves, a student that was injured that day, nervously and slowly approached the microphone, using a crutch to aid his gait. Graves said out of the 2,000 people who went into Columbine that day, no one was the same upon leaving.

“Everyone was broken. We all bled blue and silver,” he said. Graves was shot six times and paralyzed with a spinal cord injury. Graves sent thanks to the firemen, sheriff and emergency medical technicians that saved his life that day.

Against all odds, after 49 surgical procedures, he was able to walk again. Even though he went through something most people will never have to endure, Graves said, “I am a rebel through and through. My daughter, she will be a rebel. We are rebel strong.”

Patrick Ireland was a typical teenager in 1999. He would gamble in the cafeteria, and drink with his buddies. He became a symbol of Columbine when images of him escaping from the school were broadcasted. He still remembers the years before the tragedy fondly.

Ireland said he had a feeling of pride seeing himself jump from the window.

“I’m proud to be one, just one of the symbols of that day,” he said.

He was shot in the head twice and in the foot once. It left him paralyzed on his right side. His recovery was a long process, as he had to learn how to walk and talk all over again.

After 20 years, two words have stuck with Ireland: love and forgiveness.

“When I think of love in the world, I think of all the good people out there, the belief that love exists, the belief that love triumphed,” he said.

Ireland said that recovery is an implication that the road is coming to an end. He said people can choose their attitude and that they are only a victim when they allow themselves to be.

“Dwelling on what is bad in the world results in a loss of energy and does nothing to improve our lived,” he added.

He said that for there to be a need for forgiveness there must be a debt; it takes time and patience to grant forgiveness.

Dawn Anna, mother of Columbine victim Lauren Townsend, approached the microphone, tissues in hand, prepared for any tears that might fall during her speech.

“Twenty years, can it really be that long?” She added that anytime there is a shooting they are transported back in time to April 20, 1999. “Every cell in our bodies understands what they’re going through.”

She said that people still ask her how she is doing.

“We’re changed, weaker in some places, but hopefully we’re stronger in most of them. Our hearts have giant holes in them, but our hearts are bigger than they were 20 years ago,” she said.

Anna believes that helping others has been a part of that change. She said that families have found ways to reach out and help others by building the new library and the atrium at Columbine, and then by raising money for the Columbine Memorial.

Anna proposed that April 20 be a day of service for Columbine. She got her wish and more when Gov. Jared Polis declared the date a day of service for the entire state of Colorado.

He said that when he was asked to attend the memorial, he didn’t even check his calendar before agreeing. At the ceremony, he made the declaration public.

“The state of Colorado will always remember Columbine and what it means to all of us,” said Polis.



Columbine survivor Will Beck places a flower on the Columbine Memorial on April 19. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the school shooting.

Frank DeAngelis, former Columbine High School principal, took the stage last. He said the classes of 1999 through 2002 were forced to grow up too quickly due to the events that took place that day. He wished he could take away their pain and heal their wounds.

“All I can do is offer hope for a brighter future,” DeAngelis said. He added that he hopes that school violence will come to an end and that society will come together to make it happen. “Never forgotten.”

The students at Columbine High School continue to thrive and honor the lives lost in 1999. They went out to the community to complete acts of kindness such as volunteering at homeless shelters and doing spring cleaning at the homes of senior citizens. They were involved in over 40 different projects.

Doves were released as the names of the Columbine 13 were read one by one.

The Queen City Pipe Band returned one last time to an audience that had cried, laughed and listened intently to stories while they were away. The ceremony came to a close with a performance of “Amazing Grace” by the bagpipers while the doves flew in front of the stage.