

# Stonewalled

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WESTWORD

## The Story They Don't Want to Tell

On the morning of Judgment Day, minutes before they launch their deadly assault on Columbine High School, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold complete their last video project together. Guns loaded, bombs and extra ammo packed in duffel bags and trench coats, they take turns staring into the camera, making their farewells to their families and willing their belongings to various friends.

"I know my mom and dad will be in shock and disbelief," says Harris. "I can't help it."

"It's what we had to do," says Klebold.

"That's it," says Harris. "Sorry. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Klebold echoes.

The tape ends with an image that disappears too quickly for the casual viewer to absorb. It's a momentary glimpse of a sign on the wall of Harris's bedroom, with someone's arm partially blocking the view. Still visible, though, are the letters CHS, a drawing of a bomb with fuse lit and, in big black letters, the word CLUE.

Thirty minutes later, the two teens will be roaming the halls of Columbine, tossing bombs and shooting helpless classmates. Thirteen dead. Twenty-three wounded. Within an hour or so, Harris will put a shotgun in his mouth and excavate the cranial vault -- followed into extinction, seconds later, by Klebold. But even with the countdown under way, the pair can't resist thumbing their noses at their parents, the cops, the whole world one last time. They leave behind a billboard of their intentions, knowing that investigators will find it after it's too late. Here you go, boys and girls: a CLUE for the clueless.

The information about this last-frame image didn't come from inside the Columbine investigation, which has been as leaky as a grass hut in a monsoon. It didn't come from *Time* magazine, which revealed the contents of the Harris-Klebold tapes in a splashy cover story right before Christmas, or from the thundering herd of reporters who demanded their own screening of the tapes in the wake of the *Time* scoop.

No, the uncovering of the killers' final message was the work of a small group of angry, frustrated Columbine parents, who were blindsided by the *Time* story -- published only weeks after Jefferson County officials had assured them that the tapes wouldn't be released. The parents then insisted on having a chance to view the mess themselves. They took notes, rewound and freeze-framed their way through the three hours of Klebold-Harris videos, all the way to the final shot. For Brian Rohrbough, whose son, Daniel, was killed at Columbine, the tapes answered many questions; they left him with plenty more. A harsh critic of Sheriff John Stone's handling of the Columbine probe, Rohrbough has made numerous requests for information from investigators, many of which have been denied. "It turns out that [the *Time* reporter] saw just about anything he wanted to see, stuff we've never been allowed to see," he says. "Stone promised to provide us with more, but now he's saying he can't show us anything else."

The furor over the *Time* story widened an already serious rift between Sheriff Stone and victims' families. Outrage over the release of the tapes has prompted calls for Stone's resignation, and inspired an effort to petition for a recall election targeting him, which will commence in earnest this summer. It's also been a source of embarrassment and consternation within the sheriff's office; morale has sunk so low that a handful of deputies' wives have shown up at recall meetings, eager to lend a hand.

For his part, Stone has publicly expressed regret for the videotape mishap but said that he, too, was victimized. He claims that *Time* reporter Tim Roche suckered him, violating a confidentiality agreement with his office that allowed Roche to view the tapes on a "background" basis. Executives at the news magazine have denied there

was any such agreement; several key sources within the sheriff's office, however, insist Roche promised to keep the tapes out of his reporting.

Yet the *Time* debacle is hardly an isolated occurrence. Ever since Stone's office took charge of the Columbine crime scene last April 20, the biggest criminal investigation in Colorado history has been a freak show of grisly rumors and leaks, scattershot accusations and official misstatements, ranging from the sheriff's initial announcement of "up to 25" deaths to the very public hunt for additional suspects to the appearance of a snippet of the cafeteria surveillance video on the national news (and, later, on the cover of *Time*). Just three weeks ago, after the *Denver Post* ran a copyrighted front-page story supposedly offering a preview of the long-awaited final report on the investigation, Stone felt compelled to write a letter to the families of the dead, assuring them that the *Post* hadn't been privy to any confidential material.

"The information contained in the *Post* stories had already been made public," Stone wrote. "While most of the reporters we have worked with have been honorable and responsible, I underestimated the competitiveness of some members of the media. Unfortunately, this has caused some of you distress, for which I hope you will accept my apology.

"Our goal throughout the Columbine investigation has been to ascertain the most accurate information possible and to present it to you and the public in order to help bring this tragedy to some closure...We all share the same objective: To determine as accurately as possible how the attack on Columbine was planned and carried out."

The letter didn't placate Brian Rohrbough. He says the sheriff is mistaken if he thinks the families' questions only concern how the attack took place, and he bristles at the word "closure."

"There is no such thing as closure, or any desire for closure," he declares. "It's our kids, and we don't want to put them behind us. We're not trying to relive April 20; everyone's accepted that their kids are gone. But everyone wants to know why it happened, if it could have been prevented, should it have been handled differently -

- and, most important, what can we do right this minute to keep it from happening again? We're not getting those answers."

With the release of the sheriff's final Columbine report still weeks, if not months, away, there's little prospect of closure soon for anyone who wants those answers. And many of the toughest questions about Columbine won't be addressed in the report. Undersheriff John Dunaway describes it as "an executive summary of the entire investigative effort," which will present a scrupulous timeline of official actions but won't attempt to evaluate the performance of the emergency response teams or stray into discussion of possible accomplices. Despite the fact that investigators say they've found no evidence to date anyone other than Klebold or Harris was directly involved in the attack, the case remains open, much of its findings sealed from public view.

"The sheriff's office is under no obligation, legally or otherwise, to produce a public report," Dunaway notes. "But because of the nature of this crime and the attention it has generated, we have felt some obligation to report to the public at large what occurred."

Dunaway maintains that there has never been "a 'leak' of any confidential information that was done intentionally by any member of the sheriff's office. This office is open and forthcoming with the media, to our own detriment, it would seem."

From the outset, the sheriff's office has blamed much of the confusion surrounding the investigation on the press. It was the media, after all, that ran with sketchy, unconfirmed stories about bogus suicide notes, the Trenchcoat Mafia and the killers' supposed affiliations with goths and hate groups, a mythology about the massacre that persisted months later ("Doom Rules," August 5, 1999). It was the media that stirred up the families' animosity with secondhand revelations and phony exclusives. ("They had that information for months," Dunaway says of the recent *Post* article. "Yet it's structured in a way that looks like these bozos over here at the sheriff's office can't keep anything confidential.") It was the media that

created the "perception" that the final report has been delayed again and again, by running overly optimistic stories about its pending release. And it was the media, in the form of *Time*, that bamboozled Sheriff Stone and offered the grieving families, as a sick Christmas present, the spectacle of Harris and Klebold showing off their stash of weapons and their hit list.

But blaming the messenger ignores the extent to which media outlets have taken their cues from the sheriff's office -- often from Stone himself. In the first weeks of the investigation, Stone repeatedly aired his conviction that Harris and Klebold didn't act alone, and then obligingly named suspected accomplices on national television. Reports that the investigation was nearing completion came out of the sheriff's office as early as last August, only to be "corrected" by subsequent reports (many phases of the investigation, Dunaway says, didn't wind down until January). And regardless of the actual arrangement, it was Stone's decision to provide access to sensitive materials to *Time*, thereby incurring the wrath of Columbine parents. The ongoing public-relations fiasco has prompted several parents of the murdered and wounded to throw their support behind the recall effort. Some have accused Stone of grandstanding, using the tragedy for his own political gain, and worse. His most virulent critics predict the final report will be a whitewash, skirting ugly questions about how the sheriff's office handled previous complaints concerning Eric Harris and what might have been done to save more lives once the shooting began.

"There are 9,000 rumors about Columbine, and the police report, unfortunately, is one of them," said Randy Brown, the Columbine parent who launched the recall campaign, at a recent gathering of recall supporters. "Don't expect the truth."

Dunaway says Brown, whose son Brooks was labeled a possible suspect by Stone, is pursuing his own agenda with the recall. But the sheriff's right-hand man seems baffled by the outrage of other parents. "I feel our handling of this case has been as clean and objective as it could have been," he says. "No law-enforcement jurisdiction in the country has ever dealt with a case like this."

He adds, "We have communicated extensively with the families at every turn. But this thing has taken on a life of its own. We don't have anyone to prosecute, other than the people who helped them obtain the guns. There's nobody to put in the dock for the murders of all these children. Not having somebody to blame, except the killers themselves, [the families] turn and attack the very people who have tried to help them."

Rohrbough says that Jeffco investigators promised to meet with him at any time and answer all of his questions, but have since blown him off repeatedly. "They don't want to talk to us," he says simply. "They have a ton of things to hide. They don't want to tell the families what happened to their kids, but a lot of them have started to put it together."

For months Rohrbough and his ex-wife, Sue Petrone, have tried to recover the clothes their son was wearing when he was murdered. Their reasons are both personal and forensic; Rohrbough is convinced that "the clothes tell the story they don't want to tell," the story of how Dan died. At first investigators told them the clothing was a biohazard, he says. When they checked with medical labs and presented evidence to the contrary, the investigators still refused to give them the clothing, citing the open nature of the case. At one point, one of the lead investigators "got nasty" with them, yelling at Sue.

"I'd sensed before that there were a lot of problems," Rohrbough says, "but that was the first time I realized that we're the enemy. It was never Klebold and Harris. It's us."

### **Blowing Smoke and Pointing Fingers**

Given the pandemonium of April 20 and the emotional television coverage that followed, it was probably inevitable that the Columbine investigation would be mired in controversy from the start. Law-enforcement officials were quick to praise the multi-agency response to the tragedy, but no amount of kudos could defuse the images of carnage replayed over and over on the nightly news, or answer the questions those images raised.

Two days after the attack, Attorney General Janet Reno assured reporters at a Jefferson County press conference that Columbine was emerging as "a textbook case of how to conduct an investigation, of how to do it the right way." Reno's view was soon seconded by that of Los Angeles police chief Bernard Parks, who'd sent officers to observe the investigation process hours after the shooting stopped and later wrote a warm letter of thanks to Sheriff Stone, praising "the professionalism of all the involved personnel" and "their bravery and supreme dedication to duty."

But such endorsements, from the folks who brought you Waco and the chronic scandals of the LAPD, offered scarce comfort. They were at odds with what the nation had seen on TV: the massing of hundreds of police officers outside the school while scores of terrified students were still trapped inside; the painfully methodical, four-hour sweep of the building by SWAT teams while gravely wounded victims, including teacher Dave Sanders, fought for their lives without medical help; the slow-motion rescue of a wounded Patrick Ireland -- more than two hours, it turned out, after the shooters had killed themselves. Over the next 36 hours, as the bodies of the dead remained in the school while bombs were removed, the questioning began: How could law enforcement be so powerless to counter the rampage of two teenagers? What the hell happened?

People looked to Sheriff Stone for answers. And that's when the questions started to multiply.

John Stone had been Jefferson County's sheriff for less than four months when Columbine came crashing down on his shoulders. Although he'd worked nineteen years as a police officer in Lakewood, he'd been out of law enforcement for more than a decade, serving as a county commissioner, when the retirement of Ron Beckham prompted him to run for the sheriff's job in 1998. Stone emerged victorious in a three-way Republican primary and then easily beat an independent opponent in the GOP-dominated county, despite reservations among line officers about his long hiatus from police work.

Accustomed to speaking his mind as a commissioner, Stone had difficulty adjusting to the crisis that was Columbine. On April 20, while parents waited in agony for news of their kids, he was all too eager to share what he thought he knew, telling reporters there were seventeen "confirmed" dead and reports of up to 25 bodies. Over the next few days Stone and his top commanders stumbled again and again, referring to three youths in trench coats who'd been picked up near the school as suspects when they'd already been cleared; suggesting that surveillance videos from the school would show the gunmen firing at students when the tapes hadn't yet been analyzed; claiming that sheriff's deputies had prevented Klebold and Harris from escaping.

Crossed signals with the investigation team prompted Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas to declare on national television that an arrest was imminent. At one point, Stone was obliged to hold a midnight press conference to correct statements he'd made hours earlier.

Stone soon opted to give fewer interviews and let his able public-information officers handle most of the questions. He's become even more cautious about talking to the press since the *Time* article, which was accompanied by an ominous photo of Stone and Undersheriff Dunaway, in full dress uniforms and latex gloves, posing with the guns Klebold and Harris used to murder their classmates. "He's been pretty reluctant to do any interviews after the *Time* flap," says sheriff's office spokesman Steve Davis. "He's a little gun-shy." (Stone declined *Westword's* request for an interview, but responded to questions in writing.)

Some Columbine families wish Stone had curbed his tongue earlier -- particularly Randy and Judy Brown. In the winter and spring of 1998, before Stone took office, the Browns filed several complaints about Eric Harris with the sheriff's department; they even provided investigators with pages downloaded from Harris's Web site in which he discussed assembling and detonating pipe bombs and threatened to kill their son Brooks: "I don't care if I live or die in the shootout, all I want to do is kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can, especially a few people. Like Brooks



Brown." But the sheriff's office never contacted Harris's parents or took any action against the teen, who was on probation at the time for theft.

After the shootings, the Browns publicly blasted the sheriff's office for failing to take their complaints seriously. Stone shot back on the *Today* show, describing Harris's online invective as a "subtle threat" that wasn't prosecutable. Noting that Brooks had told reporters Harris had warned him away from the school minutes before the attack began, he declared the criticisms a "smokescreen."

"Brooks Brown could possibly be a suspect," Stone said. "Mr. Brown, as well as several others, are in the investigative mode."

The Browns were livid. It was the sheriff who was blowing smoke, they declared, trying to cover up his agency's incompetence by casting suspicion on the very people who'd recognized that Eric Harris was dangerous and had tried to get the cops involved. "Every time we brought up the Web pages, he always diverted attention to us," Randy Brown says now. "Sheriff Stone had absolutely no evidence of Brooks being involved. This shows what kind of person he is."

Brooks Brown wasn't the only one to get the Richard Jewell treatment from Stone and his top brass. The sheriff's off-the-cuff sniping at Harris's parents undoubtedly contributed to their reluctance to speak with investigators for months, and his office's willingness to identify other potential suspects by name, including at least one juvenile, appalled defense attorneys. But Dunaway says that his boss's terminology was accurate, that there were plenty of reasons to suspect Brooks.

"This Brown person is telling us that he is in direct personal contact with Harris moments before the killings begin," Dunaway says. "And Harris tells him that he likes him and that he should leave the school. Then he shows up in a class photo with Harris and Klebold, and they're all pointing fingers at the camera, as if they had guns."

The Browns paid for a private polygraph test to establish that their son had no prior knowledge of the attack; he passed. But to this day the sheriff's office has never

formally cleared Brooks; Dunaway will only say there's no evidence "at this time" to connect him to the shootings.

"They're the ones who keep talking about this stuff," he says of the Browns.

"They're the ones who went to their own polygraphist, but when our investigator asked for the results and the questions, they refused to give us any of that information. To say they were cooperative with the investigation is not correct. They were not cooperative."

"That's a lie," Randy Brown responds. "We spent hours with the police and the FBI. The only reason they wanted the polygraph results was to try to discredit them. All these people care about is their own reputation. They don't care about anyone else at all."

Over the past year the Browns have sought to assemble the paper trail of their contacts with the sheriff's office, only to find much of it missing or denied to them. They have been told there's no record of any incident report stemming from their first complaint about Eric Harris over a broken windshield (Judy Brown says that deputies contacted the Harrises twice about that complaint). They have been told that the Browns themselves insisted that the Harrises not be contacted about the online death threats. (Randy Brown says he asked that the officers not mention Brooks as the source of the information, for fear of reprisals, but strongly urged them to contact Eric's father.) They have been told that John Hicks, the detective assigned to the case, has no record of meeting with them in his office in March 1998 -- a meeting the Browns recall vividly because, they say, two bomb technicians gave them a quick lesson in pipe bombs and Hicks indicated that his office already had a file on Eric Harris.

According to Division Chief John Kiekbusch, many of the "missing" records the Browns have sought were routinely purged or never existed to begin with. Last spring the sheriff's office issued a statement confirming that a computer check in response to the Brown complaints had failed to turn up Harris's prior arrest for

theft; "I cannot verify that a computer check on Harris was done or the information produced by such a check," Stone says now.

Judy Brown says she has been told she can no longer contact clerks in the sheriff's office to make public-records requests like any other citizen, but instead must direct her inquiries to a senior administrator, who hasn't returned her calls in weeks. "The Browns are free to speak with any sheriff's office personnel as appropriate to their inquiry or needs," Stone says.

"Our lives have turned into a really bad *X-Files*," says Brooks Brown.

For Brooks, the burden of being branded a suspect has never entirely gone away. Students have hissed "murderer" at him on the street and hurled obscenities from passing cars; even a year later, total strangers feel entitled to berate him. An avid debater, he recently returned to Columbine to watch his former team in action, only to be escorted out by a security guard.

"It's been horrible," he says. "I don't think anyone knows how hard it is to have a best friend that was killed, a really close person like Daniel Mauser, and you can't go to his parents because they might think you helped kill him. I was also good friends with Rachel Scott."

Brooks's own contact with investigators left him with the impression that the probe was proceeding in a very selective, even myopic fashion. In his first three interviews with a Jeffco sergeant and an FBI agent, the pair focused exclusively on the events of April 20. "That's pretty much all they asked me," he says. "They never asked about my friendship with Eric or Dylan. They never asked about the Web pages. They never asked about anything but what happened between eleven and twelve o'clock that day."

On the fourth and final interview, they arrived with Brooks's backpack, which he'd left in a friend's car during the melee. They had found poems he'd written and left in the pack, poems about hating jocks and about a Columbine student who'd killed his stepfather and then himself the year before.

"They had me read four or five of them," Brooks recalls, "and then they asked, 'What does this mean?' They thought it meant I was involved in Columbine. I told them I like to write poetry and it's not happy all the time. After about an hour, my dad told them to leave."

Brooks Brown has never seen the tapes Klebold and Harris made documenting their preparations for Armageddon. No investigator has ever quizzed him or his friends about the nicknames and cryptic references on those tapes to various associates and enemies. No one from Jeffco or the FBI has ever solicited his insights for a psychological profile of the killers, even though he'd been a close friend of Dylan Klebold's since they were children. As far as motive goes, it seems the investigators are satisfied with the oft-quoted phrase, "They hated everybody" - - an explanation that doesn't explain anything, while seeming to exonerate Columbine's see-no-evil administration and its troubled student culture from any liability in the matter.

Brooks has his own theories about what drove the killers. He suspects their motives may have been different, even if the mission was largely the same. He wonders if their suicides in the school library may have been hastened by a merciful mistake, one last miscalculation leading to a hasty exit.

"They were assuming the SWAT team was going to be there any minute," he says. "Just like everybody else."

### **"Like a Couple of Rambo Nuts"**

Sheriff Stone has tended to characterize the recall action as an extension of his feud with the Browns; he's even referred to the campaign as "the Brown effort to recall me." But the situation is actually more complicated than that. Although Randy Brown obtained the official paperwork for the recall, he says he did so at the urging of other Columbine parents who were upset with the *Time* article, and he has since received support from other quarters as well.

To place the recall before voters this fall, Stone's opponents will have to gather a minimum of 42,000 valid signatures in sixty days -- which means they'll probably

have to collect at least 60,000. That's a tall order for a grassroots campaign in the sprawling suburbs, particularly since Columbine is a hot-button issue primarily on the south side of the county. Other high-profile homicides, such as the still-unsolved Subway shop murders, have spurred further criticism of the sheriff's office, but the recall effort remains largely a reaction to Columbine.

"Stone has no business being sheriff," says Victor Good, chairman of the Colorado Reform Party, which has voted to back the recall. "We thought he'd learned his lesson. But instead of having a legitimate press conference when the facts are known, he chooses to play favorites and pander to *Time*. That's just unacceptable." Like Brown, Good is hardly a disinterested party; his stepson, Nate Dykeman, was also a friend of Klebold's and Harris's who was caught in the maw of the media frenzy. But anger over the release of the tapes has also forged unlikely alliances between the Browns and victims' families that had previously shunned them because of the cloud of suspicion cast on Brooks.

"Randy and Judy Brown are wonderful people, and every point they have is absolutely valid," declares Angela Sanders, daughter of slain teacher Dave Sanders. "I've had very little contact with the sheriff's office, but I do believe that Sheriff Stone needs to be gone. He hasn't done a very good job of protecting the families."

Dunaway contends that the sheriff's office decided to cooperate with *Time* in an effort to *help* the families. "*Time* has misrepresented to the nation their direct violation of our confidentiality agreement with them," he says. But even if an off-the-record agreement was violated, the affair raises disturbing questions about how the sheriff's office has dealt with the most sensitive aspects of the Columbine investigation -- and why.

According to Dunaway, *Time* writer Timothy Roche first approached him about doing an article on the "human impact of this experience" -- how the tragedy had affected the investigators as well as teachers, students and others. So that no confidential details of the investigation would be released inadvertently, Dunaway monitored Roche's interviews with his officers.

"This guy was here probably a week or more interviewing key people," Dunaway says. "I sat in on those interviews, and the questions were perfectly consistent with the nature of the story as he represented it to us. We believed he was going to write a story that would bring closure to the community around this thing."

After most of his interviews were completed, Roche asked to see the Harris-Klebold tapes. Dunaway already had "a hundred requests" from media organizations for the tapes, excerpts of which had been read into the record at a sentencing hearing for one of the teens' gun suppliers in November; under the state open-records law, he couldn't release them to *Time* without turning them over to everyone else, too. But Roche had a novel pitch, Dunaway says. The reporter told him he wanted to view the tapes, not for their content, but in order to obtain crucial insights into the way the killers thought and acted, so that he could write a better story.

With Stone's blessing, Dunaway and Roche struck a deal. "I told him that if he were allowed to see them, he couldn't reference them in any way," Dunaway says. "He couldn't refer to ever having seen them, because the instant he did that, it would put them in the public domain, and they'd have to be available to everyone. He agreed explicitly to every condition."

Roche went to Kate Battan, the Columbine lead investigator, and told her that the undersheriff had given him permission to view the tapes. "I said, 'I think there may be a misunderstanding here' -- because there was no way on God's green earth I was going to show him those tapes," Battan recalls. "So I called the undersheriff and told him I was a bit confused."

Battan handed the phone to Roche. While she and two other witnesses listened, she says, Roche repeated to Dunaway the conditions he had accepted: "I listened to him say, 'That's right, I'm not going to quote from them, I only want a better understanding of what you guys were going through when you were investigating this.'"

Roche referred questions about his dealings with the sheriff's office to a *Time* spokeswoman, who simply reiterated an earlier statement that the magazine had violated no agreement. Dunaway acknowledges that the arrangement was an unusual one, but insists that it did exist.

"Frankly, he had our confidence," the undersheriff says. "In thirty years, I had never been burned by a journalist. Think about it. Was there any reason we would have subjected ourselves to this kind of abuse? This caused the whole office a lot of grief."

But Stone's critics say the effort to portray the sheriff and his people as innocent victims of a manipulative journalist won't wash. What shocked the Columbine parents wasn't the possibility that a national magazine might have thrown ethics out the window for the sake of a killer exclusive ("Are you going to burn a source over the largest circulation that magazine has seen in some time? Hell, yes," snaps Kate Battan), but the astonishing degree of access the magazine was granted, "in confidence" or not, to previously off-limits material -- including key details about the massacre itself.

Battan says she was present when Roche reviewed the Harris-Klebold videos. He took notes, she recalls, but he wasn't allowed to pause or rewind the tapes. Another source, however, says Roche went over the tapes several times; the extensive quotation and description of physical details in the final article certainly indicates repeated viewings. It's also clear that Roche obtained extensive information about the rampage that could only have come from the investigators themselves, including the positions in which certain victims' bodies were found and the final actions of the killers in the library. (Battan says she refused Roche's request to see crime-scene photos.) The sheriff's office even provided *Time* with its cover, a technically enhanced still photo of Harris and Klebold, armed to the teeth, taken from the cafeteria surveillance video. Dunaway explains that the image had already leaked out indirectly, through law-enforcement presentations; Battan says Roche promised not to use the photo on the cover.

The eagerness to cooperate with *Time* displayed an astonishing lack of skepticism by veteran law-enforcement officials. Basic questions were never asked: Why would a deadline-harried reporter spend hours reviewing materials (and taking notes) that he couldn't use in any way? How could watching Eric Harris recite the names of the "fucking bitches" who never returned his phone calls help the reporter understand what the *police* were going through? What does all this have to do with "closure" for the community, anyway?

After the article came out, Battan received a phone call from Roche. "He wouldn't say he lied to me, but he didn't deny it, either," she says. "He said, 'Kate, you know how editors are.'"

But if Roche was overruled by his bosses in the matter, so was Battan; she didn't want to show him the tapes in the first place. "It doesn't matter what the intent was," she says. "There are going to be people who say, 'Why did you allow them to do this?' I don't know that we can answer that. But it seems absurd to believe that we let them see something, knowing they were going to put it in their magazine, when obviously it was going to cause a stir."

Obviously. Recognizing that other news outlets were after the tapes and fearing that it would get beat on its own scoop, *Time* moved up the scheduled publication of its Columbine story by a week, guaranteeing that the killers' venom-laced tauntings and recriminations would be on everyone's breakfast table in time for the holidays. Within hours of the magazine hitting the newsstands, the calls for Stone's resignation began. The sheriff was publicly vilified and privately castigated by seething victims' families, whom he sought to appease with apologies and offers to view the tapes. Merry Christmas.

The *Time* story presented a great deal about Columbine that was previously unknown to the public; it also revealed quite a bit about the leadership at the sheriff's office. Take the now-infamous picture of the sheriff and the undersheriff holding the murder weapons. The image was actually the result of two photo sessions. When the first session didn't produce a usable shot because of poor interior lighting, the photographer requested another chance outdoors. Stone and



Dunaway obliged, dressing up and hauling the guns out of the evidence room for a second time.

Here's how Dunaway explains the evolution of that picture. The photographer wanted "candid photos" of the officers in uniform. Then he persuaded them to assist him in photographing the guns, saying that shots of the weapons merely lying on a table were "too stark."

"Remember, the whole story was to be a closure thing," Dunaway says. "The way they were going to present these photos was, 'Here are the county's senior law-enforcement officials, determined to see this Columbine investigation through relentlessly.'

"I think they deliberately posed these photos to make them as inflammatory as they could. If they'd written the story from the slant they said they would, the photo would have been fine. But the way it came out, it made us look like a couple of Rambo nuts or something."

Randy Brown thinks the photo reveals why the sheriff's office opened its evidence vaults for *Time*. "They thought they were going to look like heroes," he says. "I believe John Stone thought he was going to be on the cover."

"That photo is ego, pure and simple," says one veteran Jeffco deputy, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "When Columbine happened, the smartest thing Stone could have done is say, 'I'm new here, talk to this guy.' That's not his style. He's concerned with whatever will put him on the front page."

Stone's supposedly colossal ego has been a sore point among his own line officers, many of whom regard the sheriff as a career politician rather than a career cop. As a candidate, Stone pledged to cut bureaucracy and beef up the number of street officers in the chronically understaffed agency; he's since reshuffled the command structure to create three "division chiefs," a new layer of management. (Stone says he's deployed more deputies by modifying duty schedules and has slightly decreased overall supervisory positions.) But much of the grumbling out in the field has to do with the sheriff's efforts to repackage the agency's image to suit him

-- changing the official name from sheriff's "department" to "office," for instance -- while sullyng its reputation with his shoot-from-the-lip behavior.

"Morale is as bad as I've ever seen it," the deputy declares. "The arrogance is still there, and we all suffer the consequences for it."

Brown accuses the sheriff of trying to "capitalize" on Columbine. In a six-month period following the shootings, Stone made presentations at eleven out-of-town conferences dealing with the tragedy, ranging from a Florida Sheriff's Association gathering in Palm Beach to a hate-crime symposium in Sacramento to a group of Canadian police chiefs in Ontario. He's hardly unique in that regard; school officials, fire and medical personnel and even journalists have offered their "expertise" on Columbine in dozens of forums since last April. Stone says he has "a professional obligation" to help other law-enforcement agencies prepare for incidents of school violence and to assist in developing intervention strategies before violence occurs. Still, his travels amounted to 32 days in six months; while Stone was overseeing the investigation and running the sheriff's office, over one-sixth of his time was devoted to speaking engagements out of state.

"He's gone around the country telling people how great he is and how his officers did everything right," says Brian Rohrbough. "At the same time, he's saying they're not going to critique themselves in this final report."

The Klebold-Harris videos are now tied up in several lawsuits, including one filed in federal court by the county attorney on behalf of the sheriff's office, seeking a belated ruling on whether those tapes and the school surveillance tapes can be turned over to the media. The *Time* story is still available to the public, though, and the recall group has made fliers featuring the photo of Stone and Dunaway. Seduced by the national press, the sheriff has become the poster boy for the campaign to remove him from office.

### **The First Lie and the Last Breath**

Brian Rohrbough knows exactly when people started lying to him about Columbine. It started on April 20, 1999, at 5:30 p.m., when a handful of parents were still waiting at Leawood Elementary School, with faltering hopes, for news of their children.

"The first lie was, 'There's another busload of kids coming,'" he says.

For hours Rohrbough had been struggling with a feeling that he was never going to see his son again. Officials' assurances that there were still kids being evacuated rang hollow, and by half-past five he'd had enough. He turned to Sue Petrone and said, "Danny's dead. It's over." A woman standing nearby overheard him.

"Don't give up hope," she said. "There's one more bus coming."

Rohrbough turned to the woman and said, "Have you no decency at all? My son's dead. We've heard there's 25 kids dead in there. And you're going to stand here and lie to me?"

The woman shut up and walked away. Perhaps she meant well; perhaps she merely believed what others were telling her. But Rohrbough is convinced she was lying to him -- knowingly, deliberately, because the truth was simply too terrible. "When people lie to me, I have to know why," he says.

Other parents of murdered Columbine students have channeled their grief and anger into litigation, crusades for gun control or safer schools, religion, books and Web sites and the campaign to build a new library. Rohrbough has been active on several fronts, including the library effort, but a great deal of his energy has been devoted to trying to learn the truth about April 20. He and Sue Petrone and their circle of friends and loved ones have emerged as the official investigation's worst nightmare: a victim's family that isn't satisfied with the official answers and wants to know much, much more.

Publicly, prosecutors and cops have to offer respect, or at least lip-service, to victims' families. Rohrbough has sought to exert the moral leverage of his position to full advantage, using the media to take the sheriff's office to task again and

again. During one two-day period after the *Time* debacle, he estimates he did close to seventy interviews. "It's the only way I have of putting pressure on them to find answers," he says.

No one can take such a public stance without catching some heat as well. Rohrbough has been sharply criticized for taking it upon himself to remove "forgiveness" memorials to Klebold and Harris. But nothing has drawn as much hate mail as his attacks on Sheriff Stone: "Your victim act is wearing thin," one anonymous scribe informed him.

Rohrbough says that he's never considered himself a victim. He is the father of a victim, and he wants to know what happened to his son.

The whole story.

The problem is that the story keeps changing. Recently Rohrbough was intrigued to read in the *Rocky Mountain News* an account of DA Dave Thomas's visit to Leewood on April 20, clutching a list of thirteen names and steeling himself to notify the families because he "couldn't bear to prolong their agony." As Rohrbough recalls, Thomas informed the group that nobody knew anything for certain yet and then turned things over to the coroner, who asked for descriptions to help identify bodies.

"No one ever officially notified me that my son was dead," Rohrbough says. "We saw it in the newspaper."

In the immediate aftermath, officials maintained that they couldn't remove the dead -- including Daniel Rohrbough, who was slain outside the school -- for more than a day because of all the explosives, including the likelihood that the bodies were rigged with pipe bombs. Nobody talks about booby-trapped bodies any more. "You can't name another crime scene in history where dead kids were left for 36 hours," says Randy Brown.

Bomb squad members have told Rohrbough that the killing power of the explosives has been greatly exaggerated -- that even if the main propane bombs in the cafeteria had detonated, the blast "would not have affected the structure of the building and

would have been unlikely to kill many people," he says. Yet public accounts continue to stress that Harris and Klebold came close to setting off an oxygen-devouring fireball that would have killed hundreds.

Early accounts, drawing on passages from Harris's writings, suggested that the killers planned to escape into the neighborhood, crash a plane into a major city, or otherwise spread the carnage somehow. Within a few days, the sheriff's office was downplaying such reports as sheer nonsense. Yet as late as last September, Undersheriff Dunaway told a school-safety convention in Pittsburgh that Harris and Klebold had intended to storm Columbine, then journey into the neighborhood, shooting more people until they committed suicide or died in a firefight with the cops.

Lately the sheriff's office has been eager to dispel the "myths" of Columbine: That Harris and Klebold had help. That they targeted jocks and minorities. That the attack was in honor of Hitler's birthday. That bombs were smuggled into the school on prom night.

Rohrbough would be more impressed if most of the "myths" they're now debunking hadn't come out of the sheriff's office to begin with. "Their story doesn't work very well," he says. "The fact that they won't release the report really concerns me. They have promised me this report month after month after month."

Declaring the case still open, even though there's no evidence of any third-party involvement, has allowed the sheriff's office to shield many aspects of the investigation from scrutiny -- while satisfying no one. Documents that would otherwise be public, such as the autopsy reports, remain sealed, as the possibility of an as-yet-undiscovered conspiracy lingers in the air. "My sense is that they're trying to save whatever face they can," says one attorney who's had some involvement with the Columbine probe. "By saying the investigation is still open, it doesn't make Stone look like a complete idiot."

Rohrbough believes there may be good reasons to keep the case open. "Did they act alone on April 20? Possibly," he says. "But there's no question other people knew about it."

But what gnaws at Rohrbough, every bit as much as the prospect that possible accomplices have evaded justice, is the official story of the police response at Columbine that day. Over the past year he has talked to numerous eyewitnesses about how the attack unfolded and how rescue teams responded. Many of the accounts contradict the official timeline of the event.

Rohrbough has also seen surveillance video taken in the school commons area during the attack. The tape shows Harris and Klebold advancing, classmates running for their lives, a teacher getting shot in the ankle, two janitors -- "who are, without question, heroes," Rohrbough declares -- using handheld radios to summon help and escorting students to safety. But in the forty minutes of the tape he was allowed to see, from the time Harris and Klebold came in shooting around 11:20 a.m. until their suicides around noon, no police officer appears in a single frame of the video.

"They had the 911 calls from inside the school, the radio calls from the janitors, the eyewitness accounts," he says. "They knew by 11:24 where the shooters were in the school, and they did nothing."

Dunaway says his people have been criticized endlessly for not acting fast enough in a chaotic situation when, in fact, the first team entered the school before 11:45 a.m. "I had made the policy decision, driving to the scene, that if this thing was real -- I was really hoping that it was going to be a senior prank -- that we would make an immediate entry to the school," he says. "I knew that would be contrary to all conventional SWAT tactics, and I authorized that ad hoc team. They were inside within five or ten minutes of receiving that authorization from me."

Unfortunately, he adds, most of the shooting was already over before the SWAT teams arrived on the scene. "We've been beaten up so long and so badly," he says. "All of us here are at the point of saying, 'We did what we did.' We don't make any

apologies for it. In fact, we're proud of how we handled that situation. There were dead kids in that incident, but they were killed in the space of a very few minutes, and there are a lot of them who are alive today because of the way we reacted."

Vince DiManna, the police captain who heads the Denver SWAT team, was a member of the first team to go in -- along with five other Denver officers, two from Jeffco and two more from Littleton. DiManna, who had a son and a niece at Columbine that day, says his group was moving as quickly as possible, following the procedures for a "TNT," or tactical neutralization team.

"This was an active shooter response," he says. "We were moving rapidly through the school, but when you get to a door that's locked, you can't just go by. We don't know where the suspects are."

Like Rohrbough, DiManna praises the janitors as the "real heroes" of the day. "They're the ones who saved a lot of kids, locking doors so [Klebold and Harris] couldn't go in, and then going out to find more kids," he says. "It amazed us how many locked classrooms there were."

Soon there were other SWAT teams, funneling through two entry points -- one upstairs, one down, to avoid crossfire situations. But each door had to be opened, safe paths of escape established for the fleeing students. The teams were told that there were up to seven suspects, that they were changing clothes and might be blending in with the kids running out of the building. Although it ended up taking more than four hours to clear the building and reach the library, DiManna insists it couldn't have been done any faster.

"I wish I could have had a crystal ball that said, 'The library, let's go there,'" he says. "These guys were jumping over bombs. The whole purpose of a TNT is to draw their fire so you can end this, either by getting them to drop the weapon or killing them. As it is, we had crossfires set up and SWAT teams raising weapons at other teams coming around the corner."

Rohrbough has heard all the explanations about bombs and fire alarms, scrambled communications and crossfires. He knows the officers didn't have a crystal ball. But he argues that they did have a command post, one that was being flooded well before noon with information about casualties in the library, about Dave Sanders bleeding to death in the science room -- information that somehow didn't reach the front lines or alter the procedure.

"If someone had radioed that they had a cop down in the library, they would have stormed the building," he says, with mounting anger. "They didn't know if they had two shooters or four? That's okay, you figure it out; the one holding the big gun, he's your target. If they're not prepared to do it, then get the cops out of the way and let the parents go in. There isn't one parent who wouldn't have gone in the school. I saw a video of one who stormed past the police line and went right up to the school before they stopped him."

According to DiManna, the teams had an obligation to protect the students they encountered even as they moved forward. "From a SWAT perspective, I'd do it all the same way," he says.

Yet many other victims' families have raised privately the same sort of painful questions Rohrbough is now asking publicly. Could police have reached the library sooner, would more students have survived there? And what about Dave Sanders? When a paramedic reached the science room with the SWAT team around 3 p.m., he reported encountering an adult male who had no detectable pulse but was still manifesting "agonal breaths"; he was instructed to move on to the next patient, to treat those who were still breathing on their own first. A Denver Health Medical Center physician entered the building at 4:30 p.m. to confirm deaths; Sanders was the last casualty to be examined, and he had no vital signs at that point. Would a couple of hours or even a half hour in the response time have made a difference in his case?



The families don't have answers to those questions -- but that is not the same thing as saying they are unanswerable. In many cases, the parents don't even have a time of death for their children. Other multiple homicide cases around the country have been cleared up in weeks or a few months, with vital information from the investigation released within hours. A year later, the families of Columbine are still waiting for the sheriff's office to deliver the answers.

Rohrbough thinks he's waited long enough. This week, an attorney representing the families of Daniel Rohrbough and Kelly Fleming, another student killed in the attack, filed a formal open-records request with the sheriff's office. Citing pending deadlines for filing lawsuits, the families are seeking immediate release of the final report, 911 tapes, surveillance tapes, ballistics reports and other key information about the events of April 20. Rohrbough says he wants to see how the sheriff's report matches up with what he already knows.

"They lie as a practice," he says. "The police did everything they could do wrong April 20, and I mean specifically the command."