

TWO PASTORS HAUNTED BY COLUMBINE

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How do you preside over the funeral of a 17-year-old boy who went to school one Tuesday morning and, with his good buddy Eric Harris, massacred 13 people just for fun? Dylan Klebold helped perpetrate one of the bloodiest school shootings in history, indelibly etching the name "Columbine" into our collective memories. Yet the Rev. Don Marxhausen believed that Dylan's parents deserved to hear the message of God's grace. And so when a desperate Tom Klebold phoned, the pastor—a liberal-minded Lutheran—agreed to arrange a private service. This decision has haunted him ever since. In his sermon, Marxhausen spoke of God's love. "God, who knows about suffering and pain and loss, wants to reach out to you," he told the grieving parents, according to news accounts. As he preached, Marxhausen could see Dylan, laid out before him in an open coffin. A small mountain of beanie babies was piled around the boy's head, covering the self-administered wound that killed him. It was Saturday, four days after the shootings.

Two days later, another Littleton, Colo., pastor presided over another funeral. Cassie Bernall, a Columbine junior, had been shot in cold blood as she crouched under a library table, and word was that in her final seconds she answered her murderer's question and affirmed her belief in God. More than 2,500 people flooded the sanctuary of West Bowles Community Church, where Cassie had been a member. During his sermon, George Kirsten proclaimed Cassie a martyr. "This is Cassie's graduation day," he began. Over the next 10 years, Kirsten's persistent evangelicalism would make him the target of accusations that he was exploiting a tragedy. A Navy pilot in Vietnam, Kirsten had seen horrors. Columbine would open the floodgates of Kirsten's memory. He wrestles with those memories to this day.

God was everywhere after Columbine. The images come rushing back: the homemade white crosses that studded the small hill overlooking the school; the memorial services for 12 dead children and a beloved teacher that looped endlessly on television. Littleton was ground zero for the kind of white, evangelical Christianity that was sweeping the country at the time. The clean-cut, grieving classmates of the fallen tried to make sense of what was senseless. On the front lines, though, Littleton's pastors did not have the luxury of interpretation. Marxhausen and Kirsten (and their colleagues) were engaged in spiritual triage, tending to hundreds of traumatized families. Ten years later, these two men of God—radically different in personality and theological approach—are still struggling to deal with the damage done to them by two boys bent on murder and mayhem.

Marxhausen, now nearly 70, is a burly, plain-spoken man who arrived in Littleton in 1990, and built St. Philip Lutheran Church into a thriving, mainline congregation with more than 1,000 members. Marxhausen believes firmly in a loving, forgiving God and a nuanced approach to questions of salvation. After Columbine, local evangelicals—who said the shootings were the devil's work and who used the tragedy as an opportunity to bring people to Jesus—infuriated him. On the Sunday between Dylan's funeral and Cassie's, 70,000 mourners gathered in a parking lot to listen to Franklin Graham, among others, proclaim the gospel. Marxhausen hated the whole thing. "Franklin Graham was beating me up through my TV," he says. "I turned it off."

Still, Marxhausen might have survived the Columbine tragedy with his job intact were it not for his continued relationship with the Klebolds—and his very public support of them. After Dylan's funeral, he described the killer's parents as "the loneliest people on the planet" to *The Denver Post*. "That's where I think I started getting in trouble with my church," says Marxhausen. "I was becoming somewhat toxic with my visibility and extrovertedness."

Exhausted by the tragedy, Marxhausen took a three-month sabbatical. "You absorb everyone else's pain, and after a while that catches up to you, big time." Still, he concedes, he left when his church needed him most. When he came back in September, "it was clear this wasn't my church anymore," he says.

George Kirsten was in Israel on the day of the shootings; immediately, he turned around to come home. He had performed the marriage of Misty and Brad Bernall in 1980; more recently, he had helped guide their teenage daughter Cassie through a dark and rebellious time. Two days before the shooting, Cassie had recorded a video of herself testifying to her faith in Christ. (It was shown at her funeral.) The West Bowles congregation filled the Bernall's living room the week after April 20, praying and crying and praying some more. Kirsten was there for all of it. "What I remember most is this tremendous barrage of very hurting people," he says.

Kirsten, 65, arrived in Littleton as a Denver Seminary student in 1974. He was asked to start a nondenominational evangelical church in the 1980s, just as the megachurch movement was beginning to take off. Today, West Bowles is a soaring modern building facing the Rocky Mountains where ministers preach a fundamentalist Christianity. "We rely heavily on scripture," says Kirsten, "and on the premise that Christ is the ultimate forgiver, the ultimate lover, and that only through him can we know the Lord."

The story of Cassie's martyrdom instantly became legend at West Bowles. In youth-group meetings, kids mourned that they could not be in heaven with her, says Craig Nason, who was a friend of Cassie's and is now the West Bowles young-adult pastor. According to Kirsten, the church's youth pastor at the time approached the Bernalls about writing a book on Cassie's life, her descent into sin and her acceptance of Jesus. "She Said Yes" became an instant bestseller.

As the months passed, new evidence began to show that it had not, in fact, been Cassie who "said yes." Another girl, sitting under another library table, had said she believed in God when prompted by Klebold, who let her live, according to Dave Cullen's new book "Columbine." Brian Rohrbough, whose son, Danny, was among the first to die that day, continues to believe that propagating the Cassie legend despite contradictory evidence exploits the grief of all the families in Littleton. "Cassie Bernall deserved to have a book written about her, but if there was reason to believe that it wasn't truthful, then it's a disservice to her memory and to the community."

But at West Bowles, the Cassie legend was not then—and is not now—a matter of debate. "People were missing the big point," says Kirsten. "She said yes with her life. So to have the entire credibility of it washed away, that hurt."

The further Kirsten got from the tragedy, though, the more he began to crack. He had survived a helicopter crash in Vietnam; two months later he had watched as fellow crew members aboard the USS Enterprise burned alive. "I pushed [the pain] down, and I did that again with Columbine. When you're in it and so impacted by it, you just don't think about the effect it's having on you." A buddy finally persuaded Kirsten to go to the VA hospital, where he was diagnosed as being 80 percent disabled with PTSD.

Marxhausen now lives south of Littleton in Highlands Ranch with his wife, and he ministers to a tiny, rural congregation in mountainous Idaho Springs. In 2003, Kirsten relinquished his pulpit, though he remains the senior pastor at West Bowles. Sunday attendance has declined from 2,000 in 1999 to about 1,100 today. Kirsten takes comfort in riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle on mountain highways, and still goes to the VA hospital weekly for therapy. Marxhausen probably speaks for both men when he says the toll Columbine has taken on his life is incalculable. "I learned how fear can take hold of a community. You have to be prepared to hurt when you go into the ministry. But I never thought it would hurt that much."