

COLUMBINE MIRACLE: A MATTER OF BELIEF

The Last Words of Littleton Victim Cassie Bernall Test a Survivor's Faith--and Charity

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Valeen Schnurr doesn't want her fellow freshmen to know her as Val, the girl from Columbine. Nor does she want to be known as the Girl Who Really Said Yes, or the Living Saint, or the Almost Martyr, even though she is all of those things. And she definitely doesn't want to be known as the girl who punctured the myth of Cassie Bernall.

Schnurr knows what Cassie's story means to the people around her, knows that many who lived through the Columbine High School shootings in April cling to it as the tragedy's only redemption. They've all heard the same version over and over: In the school's library, one of the teenage killers held a gun to Cassie's head and asked if she believed in God. Cassie said "yes" and he "blew her away," as a friend later reported.

That simple, defiant "yes" stirred the collective teenage soul. Finally young Christians had a saint they could touch, a less-than-average high school junior laid bare in a new best-selling book by her grieving parents titled plainly "She Said Yes." Her peers made her a saint who died to redeem them; she made them the "Yes" generation.

But as the legend spread around the world, it began to unravel at home. Re-creating events of that day, investigators discovered weeks after the shooting what they weren't looking for and never wanted to find, and what they will now reluctantly admit: Cassie probably never said yes, or anything else. "We strongly doubt that conversation ever occurred," says Steve Davis, spokesman for the Jefferson County, Colo., sheriff's office, which investigated the shootings.

What they found was something else that Val had known all along. There was a conversation at the other end of the school library, between Schnurr and her would-be killer. He shot first, then asked if she believed in God. She said "yes," and by some miracle he walked away and she lived.

If the truth had been known early on, the legend could have been different. It could have been told that a fearless girl, crouched and bleeding, spoke the name of Jesus and lived--that she summoned God to shield her from Satan's henchman.

But the truth wasn't known, and now that it is, it barely reverberates. Even so, why does it matter? In questions of death and faith, it's the power of the story that counts, the tale that helps the mind grasp the unfathomable. Compared with that comfort, the truth is a trifle.

Should the believers accept the literal truth, they'd be left with a hopeless equation: Schnurr said yes and she lived, but saints and martyrs don't live. Saint Cassie probably said nothing and died.

It's a puzzle that Schnurr, 19, has no interest in solving. Because while it's frustrating to see someone else canonized for your miracle, the stakes here are too high. She'd have to confront two grieving parents, tense neighbors starved for hope, and an American Christian community that's found its most effective symbol in decades.

Anyway, Schnurr is devout enough to know that faith doesn't depend on the details--that if Cassie's example brings teenagers to Christ, that's what's important. Plus, Schnurr came out with her life, and right now the mundane details of an average day are miracle enough.

"The last thing I want is for someone to call me a hero," she says. "I don't want to be famous or get any title. I just want to live my life and be me."

Doubt and Suspicion

Even in easier times, Val Schnurr is the type to dodge attention. She isn't shy, she says, only self-contained and "media-unfriendly." Ask if she'd consider writing a book, and she balks. "I'm pretty uncomfortable with publicity," she says, speaking by phone from her parents' home, where she's spending the weekend. "I don't really like things that draw more attention to me."

As a freshman at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, about an hour and a half north of Littleton, she's trying hard to establish a routine and is almost succeeding. Her days are filled with making new friends, studying for midterm exams, trading an English major for psychology ("I'm really interested in why we dream"), going to football games and being a residence-hall adviser.

Still, her recent past intrudes. Part of the normal freshman routine is asking where you're from and what high school you went to, so Columbine often comes up. But most of her peers don't press the subject, and only her closest friends know she was shot.

Flashbacks come every so often. One hit a month ago when a fire alarm went off in the dorm. Then there's her ever-present reminder--the purplish scars on her arms. "I can't look at those every day and say, 'Gee, where did those come from?' " she says. "The physical wounds are a constant memory." And now the Colorado winter is coming, so her long sleeves won't look out of place.

But sometimes she can't escape being shadowed by Cassie's story. Like many of the devout Christian teens who lived through the shooting, Schnurr, who was raised Catholic, occasionally speaks at evangelical youth rallies. At these events, the teens will recall their bloody encounter, sometimes in spiritual terms, and their struggle to overcome it. Most are received with tears and applause. Schnurr gets a dose of suspicion.

Once she told her story at a youth rally honoring Cassie and Rachel Scott, another born-again Christian teen who was shot, and Schnurr says she could feel people looking at her funny.

"No one really comes out and says that never happened. They just skirt around the issue. Like they ask, 'Are you sure that's how it happened?' Or, 'Could your faith really be that strong?' " she says.

"People thought I was a copycat," she recalls. "They thought I was just following the bandwagon. A lot of people just didn't believe my story. And you know, it gets frustrating. Because you know in your heart where you were and what you said, and then people doubt you. And that's what bothers me the most."

Schnurr's story is the same one she's been telling since she came out of anesthesia after her first surgery to remove the 34 pellets that pierced her arms and torso. Her parents, Mark and Shari Schnurr, remember it perfectly, as they'd been anxiously pacing her hospital room waiting for her to speak. As she told them in bits and pieces, and later repeated to the investigators, she and some friends were studying in the library, along with a few dozen more kids. They heard shotguns and screams, and everyone crouched under the tables.

At some point, Schnurr looked up and saw boots first and then a shotgun. She was whispering prayers when the first blast hit her and knocked her to the floor, bleeding. She whispered more loudly, "Oh my God, oh my God, don't let me die."

Do you believe in God, one of the shooters asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I believe, and my parents brought me up that way," she answered, and crawled away while he reloaded. He didn't shoot at her again. "It didn't really cross my mind that something bad would come from my answer," she says now. "He asked and I couldn't say no. I don't think of it as bravery. I think of it as what I said because it's true, because it's just me. What else was I going to say?"

Taming Cassie

At first, the Schnurrs thought of their daughter's story as parallel to Cassie Bernall's, unconnected, if less well known, and with a happier outcome. Neither anticipated the copycat comments, and when they began, Val's parents turned fiercely protective.

"She has a beautiful story," says Shari Schnurr. "Then to have people question it to her face--well, that will shock anyone. You're not going to want to talk anymore. And why shouldn't she be able to talk freely? Why shouldn't she be able to tell her story without anyone second-guessing her, putting her on trial, cross-examining her?"

The announcement of the Bernalls' book made things even more tense. The Schnurrs had been meeting with investigators, poring over the tapes of the 911 calls and transcripts from witnesses, and knew what the investigators had concluded about Cassie's story. And they also knew the investigators had already told the Bernalls. ("Yes, it was brought to their attention quite some time ago," Davis confirms.)

The knowledge put the Schnurrs in a difficult position. No one wants to unravel a comforting narrative grieving parents take from their daughter's death, especially when their own daughter survived. But to say nothing felt like lying in silence.

"When you see a book that says 'She Said Yes' and you pretty much know what went down, what it's based on, it's just hard," says Mark Schnurr. "You want the truth for these kids, but you also don't want them to go through any more conflict."

One Sunday night in June, the Bernalls invited the Schnurrs to meet with them and their publisher, Chris Zimmerman, from a small Christian publishing house in Farmington, Pa., called Plough. Val told her story, and the Bernalls told theirs.

The Bernalls said they wanted to write a book mostly about Cassie's remarkable transformation from a teen obsessed with death-rock, vampires and self-mutilation to a Christian. They asked if they could include a section on Val. She agreed to a brief mention, nothing more.

After the meeting, no one could feel annoyed with the Bernalls. "I felt very sorry for them dealing with losing their daughter," says Mark Schnurr. "They had so much sadness." And even though the book only acknowledges briefly that "the exact details of Cassie's death--may never be known," no one begrudges Cassie's mother, Misty, her project. Most people have come to terms with the book the way Shari Schnurr has, as "Misty's way of healing."

Instead, the hard feelings have transferred onto the publisher. After their meeting, Mark Schnurr sent an e-mail to Zimmerman asking him to wait until the investigators issued their final report before publishing the book. "If you go ahead and publish the book, just be careful. There's a lot of conflicting information out there," he wrote.

The book is out and climbing the New York Times bestseller list. But the fights over who said what haven't stopped. Zimmerman defends his position aggressively, providing reporters' transcripts of three students in the library who swear by the original Cassie story. The Rocky Mountain News reported that one of those witnesses, Craig Scott, the original source for the Cassie story, pointed out to investigators the table where he said the conversation occurred, and it turned out to be Val's, not Cassie's.

One key source is Emily Wyant, Cassie's best friend, who was crouched right beside her, and the only eyewitness to her shooting. "Once she started hearing all that," Wyant's mother told a reporter from Salon magazine, "she said, 'That didn't happen. Why are they saying that?'" Wyant says she spoke to the Bernalls, but they say Emily never denied Cassie said yes.

While they won't discuss the details, investigators are still clear on the big picture. Most people in the library that day confirm their account. "To have one, two or three witnesses say something happened is one thing," Davis says. "But when you have 10, 20, 40 saying something else, that carries a lot more weight."

Ultimately, Zimmerman and the Bernalls fall back on their best defense, that the book barely discusses the moment of Cassie's death. Get beyond its title, and the book is a raw and moving account of the Bernalls' struggle to tame their daughter in the years before she transferred to Columbine--a guidebook for frustrated Christian parents.

Misty Bernall herself says she set out to shatter the tidy saint myth. "Cassie was our daughter, so it's hard to think of her as a saint or a martyr," she says. "We wanted people to know Cassie was an average teenager who struggled with her weight and worried about boys and wasn't even a living saint."

"To make Cassie a saint would be all too easy," she writes in the book. "It is important to add that the daughter I knew was equally capable of being selfish and stubborn, and that sometimes she behaved like a spoiled two year old."

Indeed the most gripping parts of the book depict Cassie the anti-saint, the dark teen who traded such scary letters with her best friend that her terrified mother called the police when she found them. Stacked in her drawer, they said things like "Kill your parents! Murder is the answer to all of your problems," illustrated with a picture of "Ma and Pa" strung up by their intestines, bloody daggers piercing their hearts.

'That Could Be Me' Despite the nagging existence of Val Schnurr and Misty Bernall's best efforts to humanize her daughter, the Cassie myth has taken root. Because at this point, it's moved far beyond Cassie.

"You will never change the story of Cassie," says Dave McPherson, the pastor at the Bernalls' church. To illustrate how far it has gone, he tells a story of traveling to a remote church in Sudan a few months after the shooting. The congregation's first request was that he tell the story of Saint Cassie.

"The church," he says, by which he means Catholic and Protestant, worldwide, "is going to stick to the martyr story. It's the story they heard first, and circulated for six months uncontested. You can say it didn't happen that way, but the church won't accept it. To the church, Cassie will always say yes, period."

From the minute the story was reported, it clicked. "The day of the shooting, something popped into my head right then that told me we are the revival generation, that we will go to any extent to say yes to God, even to giving our lives," says Josh Weidmann, a high school senior and founder of Revival Generation, based in Littleton.

Before the shooting, his group had a few local chapters. Now it has an office in every state, sometimes several. And when members tour teenage revivals where survivors of Columbine speak, girls storm the stage begging forgiveness just at the mention of Cassie's name.

The Bernalls' book only feeds the myth. Because that's how the lives of saints have always been told, ordinary characters who rose to extraordinary deeds. "It's not like she was a super saint or magna cum laude or something," says Brooks Gibbs, who works with Weidmann. "Lots of kids have an older sister like Cassie. If you look at her testimony, how she was in the past, it's like, 'That could be me.' "

Her story has sparked a kind of teenage hysteria, a Christian-sanctified death wish. "God has laid it on my heart that I'm going to be martyred," sophomore Tina Leonard told a Southern Baptist news service. "When I told one of my friends, he said, 'That's awesome. I wish it could happen to me.' "

As time has passed, many Christians have come to think of the Cassie story as proof of God's existence. A cover article in the current issue of Christianity Today argues that Cassie's "heroic yes, with the muzzle of a gun pressed up against" her, is this generation's defining moment, much as the assassination of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. was to the generation before.

Her "yes" defies modernity's self-centered secular humanism, the author writes, and answers definitively Time magazine's famous cover of 1966: "Is God Dead?"

"The fact that the killers brought God into it, more than once, made this episode 'more than just a schoolyard killing,' " the author writes. "Perhaps they thought that by shooting Cassie Bernall before she could answer why she believed in God would knock him off his throne--But the three-letter response to the killer's question was enough to turn the tide. It was, to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther, 'the little words that felled them.' "

Facing the Future

For the families of the two girls, the dispute over who said what is fading into irrelevance. The saint has been canonized and floated beyond them both. And what's left is only the drudgery of moving on.

The rest of the world can expect no more of a satisfying conclusion. When they publish their final report next year, investigators plan to leave out what they've discovered about Cassie. Davis say it's because "whether Cassie said yes has no bearing on the criminal case." But privately, investigators admit they'll avoid puncturing the myth for the same reason Schnurr did: They won't risk incurring the rage of a community addicted to it.

Misty Bernall regards the future as a haze of pain. She doesn't worry about criticism that she and her husband are profiting from their daughter's death. They have nothing to fear, they say, since the worst has already happened.

"People can talk all they want, but we still have to deal with that empty room and the hole in our lives," Bernall says. She knows God gives grieving parents a fog to protect them, and she dreads the inevitable moment when He lifts it.

She sees signs already that the time is approaching. These days, she keeps all the windows in Cassie's bedroom shut so she can "hug the pillow, and it will still smell like Cassie."

Schnurr and her parents haven't read the Bernalls' book, and probably never will. Schnurr, after all, has other problems to face. She has five more surgeries to endure, plus the psychological tangle. Her heaviest burden now is survivor's guilt. She's grateful God spared her but wants to know why. What does He have in store for her?

There are good days, she says, and on those she feels grimly free. "Coming so close to death means you live every day like it's your last," she says. "If God wants me, I can be gone in 48 hours or in the next 10 minutes. It comes when it comes. All I can hope is that I'll be ready."