

For Many Parents, a Vigil of Agony

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LITTLETON, Colo., April 20 – Hours after the slayings at Columbine High School, parents whose children did not come home from the school today gathered at a nearby elementary school, waiting for news they hoped would not come.

As night fell, the bodies of as many as 25 students and teachers were still in the high school a few blocks away. The dead apparently included the two suspects who walked into the high school at midday, firing guns and tossing explosives.

In the elementary school, the parents paced in hallways and stared at the walls in the gymnasium as police officers, clergymen, counselors and others hustled in and out. But there was little news.

The parents wore little white stickers on their shirts.

"Tom Mauer," read the sticker on one father's plaid shirt. "Child – Daniel Mauer." He wandered outside for a moment and walked in a circle in the gathering darkness, his lips quivering.

"I'm a parent," he said. More than a dozen news cameras were pointed at him from a discreet distance, kept there by police. "I don't want to talk right now," he said softly. "I just want to get some air."

Then he went back inside.

As instructed by police, dozens of parents who had not heard from their children, and Columbine students worried about friends who were unaccounted for gathered at Leawood Elementary School. By tonight, many of them had left in relief, having been told that their loved ones were safe.

By 8 p.m., only those who not yet heard about their children or friends remained at Leawood.

"There's not really a lot of information for them right now," said Joel Tyson, 21, a youth pastor from Orchard Road Christian Center. Tyson had come out of the school for air.



A grief-stricken woman is consoled at Leawood Elementary, where parents awaited news of their children at Columbine High School. (AP Photo/Denver Rocky Mountain News, Ken Papalco)

Nearby, a teenage girl sat on a post-and-rail fence, heaving sobs, as friends tried to console her.

"I don't think there's frustration in there yet," he said. "They are all hoping. Hoping their children just haven't reported in yet."

Officials said the bodies – including those of the two shooters, who police said "possibly" committed suicide – would not be removed from the high school until homicide investigators have sifted through the evidence. The possibility of explosives slowed the investigation.

On the sidewalk nearby, a woman stood crying. "He's gone now, he's gone now, he's gone now," she kept saying to a burly man who stood with an arm around her, rubbing her back.

"Shhh . . . shhh . . . shhh," the man kept whispering to her.

Leawood is in a neighborhood of mostly ranch-style homes and neatly trimmed lawns. Behind the school, beyond the playground, is a pasture with horses.

But the neighborhood's usual calm was gone tonight. Parked cars lined the curbs for blocks around, a helicopter hovered overhead, and now and then a siren wailed in the distance.

Another woman – a mother with a sticker on her shirt, biting her lower lip and clutching her purse to her chest – jogged from the school, turned on the sidewalk and ran across the street to a car. She hurried past a delivery man carrying a carton of paper coffee cups. He averted his eyes from her and walked into the school, past Salvation Army workers at the door.

"A lot of crying, a lot of depression in there," said Luke Milam, 17, a Columbine student who stood outside Leawood with five of his friends.

"My brother heard about this on his aircraft carrier," one of the friends, Pat Neville, 15, told the others.

"My dad called; he was in Kansas, and he heard about it," Milam told Neville. "My brother in Seattle heard about it."

Milam said he knows three students who are unaccounted for and was waiting for news.

"We don't know where they are," he said. "We're just hoping, maybe, they're hiding out somewhere."