

Parents, students tour school

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It looked more like a typical construction site than a school healing from the physical scars of unprecedented violence, but Susan Romanyshyn still felt jolted when someone showed where the bombs went off, so close to where her 17-year-old son had been sitting moments earlier.

"That makes your heart stop," she said Tuesday after emerging from a tour of Columbine High School open only to students and their parents. "It was emotional because I could see where Nick was, he could show me where he was sitting in the commons. I could retrace his steps.

"It was closure to the whole ordeal."

She voiced a common theme among students and parents who mingled with construction workers in a steady stream of visitors - one last chance to revisit the site of the worst school shooting in U.S. history before a makeover removes physical traces of the tragedy.

"Basically, it was part of a healing process for us," said Charles Salerno, whose 15-year-old daughter, Laurel, escaped from the commons through a passageway in the auditorium when the shooting started.

"We wanted to see where she was, to walk where she'd been. She'd described it, but it was hard to picture it without seeing it."

Guides took groups of students and parents on a tour of the construction and then left them to wander the halls to reconstruct their personal experiences. The library, where most of the carnage occurred, remained off limits as a crime scene and will not be ready when school reopens Aug. 16. A survey of staff and students will help decide its future.

But some visitors said work already has erased many other reminders of the April 20 massacre that killed 12 students and a teacher before gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold committed suicide.

A few spotted a stray bullet hole or two, but otherwise the areas ravaged by explosions and gunfire were well on the way to being remodeled. Some students had glimpsed the devastation when they were allowed inside weeks ago to claim personal belongings.

"I liked the old school," said Nick Romanyshyn, "but for some students it needed to be changed."

Others lamented the metamorphosis of once-familiar surroundings.

"It kind of upset me that so much effort was put into changing every single detail," said one 16-year-old boy who asked not to be identified. "I'm really not for the change. I'd like to see everything like it was when we left it."

One group of teenage visitors caught a glimpse of the building for the first time - before they were turned back at the door. Five teammates from a Los Angeles girls softball team, in town for a tournament, felt drawn to the site they'd seen countless times in the news.

They saw other kids filing into the building and simply fell in line, unaware that they needed school identification to enter.

"We just came to see how everybody feels, to see all the emotions," said Sonia Rojo, the team's 17-year-old shortstop. "We wanted to check it out and pay our respects. For that whole week, at our school we talked about how this could be. If it affected us like that, we could hardly imagine how it would affect people here."

For some students, the tour hinted at what lay ahead. But for just graduated seniors, the walkthrough simply reinforced the impression of violent chaos that ended their high school careers.

"Basically, it's a crummy impression," said Trevor Stark, 18. "I'll come back and see it when they're done. But it's definitely not the way I'd have chosen to leave."

The final chance to tour the school comes every half-hour from 4 to 7 p.m. today. Parent Ann Filipiak said the trip was well worth the time for her and her daughter, who will return to Columbine as a sophomore.

"This will make it easier when they go back in the fall," Filipiak said. "It's hard for anyone to go through that area and see their children suffering as they remember what happened. But it does get easier. It does get better."

Bryan Adam, who'll be a junior, said he's glad for the physical changes under way in the building, but his eagerness to start a new school year revolves around much more than that.

"I'm ready to go back," he said, "because I like this school, I like the teachers, I like the kids."

And some parents, including Susan Romanyshyn, shared the belief that reclaiming the school ultimately will be good for kids such as her two sons - even though the return will be emotional for everyone.

"For me, it'll still be hard that first day, when all the memories flood back," she said. "But this is definitely their school."