

'Was there a hint? Was there a hint?'; Friends and neighbors discuss the teens who wrought havoc

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LITTLETON, Colo. -- They were excellent students -- who built pipe bombs in their spare time.

Polite around adults, at school they picked on people of color.

Outwardly artistic, they seethed inwardly at the jocks who dominate social life at Columbine High School.

A day after Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, strode into the school, brandishing the guns and homemade grenades that they used to kill 13 people before turning their weapons on themselves, their friends and neighbors are still struggling to reconcile those contradictions.

"Even now," said Mark Heckler, whose son, Zack, was one of Klebold's best friends, "I keep asking Zack, 'Was there a hint? Was there a hint?' "

In retrospect, said those who knew the pair, there were plenty of hints.

They described boys who got high grades, who shone in creative writing and video classes, who came from seemingly stable families -- but whose fascination with racism and violence was increasingly obvious.

Zack Heckler and Dylan Klebold became friends four years ago, when both were freshmen at Columbine. Over that time, Mark Heckler watched his son's buddy evolve from "a very shy kid" into a youth who wore black military-style clothing under a long

coat, and who let his friendship with Zack slide in favor of a new group calling itself the "Trench Coat Mafia," after the long dark coats members wore.

The Hecklers started hearing more about a boy named Eric Harris, who bragged about building pipe bombs and detonating them in a field outside their upscale housing development.

Klebold was spending more time with Harris, less with Zack.

"We watched the change in Dylan," he said. "He came around less and less."

And yet: "When he came to visit us, he'd take the trench coat off and leave it in the car."

It was almost as though a persona went along with the trench coats, one that was more apparent in school, where other students said Klebold and Harris wore the distinctive garb no matter what the weather.

Matt Good, 16, who lived two doors down from Harris, said that his neighbor was always friendly when they saw each other in their cul-de-sac of split-level homes. But in school, Harris flaunted Nazi insignia, taunted black students with racial slurs, and trading German phrases with Klebold.

The two seemed to have adopted a hybrid style that incorporated elements of Goth -- involving black clothing and makeup -- and neo-Nazism. That sort of blend isn't unusual, said Brian Levin, a professor at Stockton University in South Jersey who studies hate groups.

"This is really the new face of terrorism," he said. "They're younger. They make their own ideology."

Harris and Klebold attacked the school on April 20, a day that is significant on two levels. "They knew it was Hitler's birthday," said Erik Veik, 16, who had a video production class with the youths. But the date, 4-20, also is known by marijuana users

as the legal designation for a drug charge. "Is (the significance) the penal code or Hitler's birthday? We'll never know," he said.

"What's more interesting here is that these fellows were into rebellion and revenge ... and what better way to affirm yourself at the top of a subculture than by doing the most rebellious thing you can against society, and at the same time, getting back at the people you don't like?"

In this case, said Good, that meant jocks and minorities.

"They'd say things like, 'Oh, the jocks think they're so cool. They run this school,'" said Good. And, he said, they'd make racist remarks to the school's few minority-group members students.

The antagonism was mutual.

Mike Smith, 18, a senior, was the point guard of the school's state championship basketball team, and is on the track team. He is also one of about a half-dozen African American students among Columbine's 1,800 students.

"They were ones you'd make fun of," he said, he said of the Trench Coat Mafia.

"Sometimes it'd be me calling them names. It was like fun and games," said Smith. His hair dyed blond, the basketball player Wednesday wore a Perry Ellis sweatsuit, silver chains and jewelry, and a diamond stud in his left ear. In the left lapel of his sweatsuit jacket he displayed a silver ribbon in remembrance of the victims.

He said that he and the other jocks would pick on the mafia members, egging them on with gibes of "gay," or "inbreed."

Harris and Klebold would respond in German, he said. "They'd talk back to us in another language and we'd just laugh," he said.

The tensions between the two groups came to a head at the end of the last school year. For several weeks, Smith said, the two groups fought almost daily after school.

"It was like, 'OK, we'll meet you here and we'll meet you there and get it all over with,'" he said. He said school officials knew about the fights but did little to stop them.

"Boys will be boys, just cut it out, that's what we heard," he said. "Here, the teams are so good that if you're an athlete, you're not going to get suspended unless you do something really bad."

At the time in the past, he had shrugged off the disputes. But Wednesday, he felt guilty.

"Sometimes," he added, gesturing at the school over his shoulder, "I think it's because of me."

Likewise, others searched their memories of contact with Klebold and Harris for any sign that the rampage was imminent.

The night before the slayings, Klebold and Zack Heckler spoke on the phone as they did nearly nightly, despite their waning friendship, said Zack's father.

"But Dylan said, 'Zack, I'm kinda tired,' and then he hung up," said Mike Heckler. "Now, I put two and two together after this chaos ... and I think Dylan was trying to protect Zack."

His son never saw Klebold the day of the shooting, he said. "But when we heard 'trench coat' and when we heard 'pipe bombs,' Zack knew who it was."

On the morning of the shooting, Jessica Rosencrans showed up at Columbine at 6:15 for bowling class, a senior elective. As always, Eric Harris was there.

"He seemed perfectly normal," she said of the boy who less than six hours later would help gun down 13 of her fellow students.

Erik Veik, who was in the video class with the two youths, said that he helped them to produce a video that has since been turned over to police. He would not discuss its contents.

"If that video were seen now, it would be disastrous," he said. But he remains mystified as to the killers' motives.

"The first thing I thought was 'Eric and Dylan, why did you do this?'" he said. "They did something that will never leave the hearts and minds of people in the school."