

# **Bound By A Trauma Called Columbine**

## **By Frank M. Ochberg**

To walk through Columbine High School today is to be struck by the apparent normality of it all. Students greet each other between classes. A teacher jokes with a group of girls and boys in the hall. Band members tote instruments to practice. It's almost as if the shootings of April 20, 1999, had never happened.

But the cheerful ordinariness that prevails on the surface masks a painful paradox: Though the school and the community are gradually returning to normal, they will never, on one level, be "normal" in people's minds again. The name "Columbine" will always signal more than the name of a high school. And those who lived through the killing cannot deny to themselves that their lives have been forever changed, reorganized around tragedy and loss.

Assistant principal Chris Mikesell still has upsetting lapses of concentration. "I got back from vacation, and what did I do?" she recalls with exasperation. "I drove right into my son's car!" She is distressed by the holes in her memory of the day that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold strode into the school and started shooting. A former math teacher, Mikesell had always specialized in logic and deliberation. Now she struggles with a disturbing sense of diminished control over life.

For more than a year, I have worked with survivors of the shootings at the Littleton, Colo., high school that left 14 teenagers (including the two killers) and one teacher dead, and many others wounded. I have seen Columbine struggling to recover from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)--the disorder most associated with survivors of war--and the shame and blame that attach to the profoundly wounding trauma the community suffered.

The problem is particularly acute for school officials, who were powerless to prevent the murder of children whom it was their responsibility to care for and protect. Though it probably would be best for many of them to leave the school and take positions elsewhere, only one member of the school's top administrative team has done so. Most of the staff members cling to their posts out of mixed feelings of obligation, loyalty and guilt that weigh heavily and slow their recovery.

I came to Columbine following a July 1999 FBI conference on the phenomenon of school shootings. Detectives, criminologists, psychiatrists, attorneys, principals and teachers, including several from Columbine, gathered in a quest to understand the current wave of American school killings. I met with Columbine community leaders, and the relationship I formed with them led to many visits and conversations. My closest contacts have been with the administrative team responsible for day-to-day operations. But I have also spoken with guidance counselors who described difficult cases and journalists who revealed their own anguish after covering Columbine. Most encouraged me to write about their process of recovery.

PTSD has been a medically recognized diagnosis since 1980. It is also accepted by the military and in law. But the public at large still views it with skepticism and dismissal. In my home state of Michigan, I have known employers who told

employees suffering from severe PTSD simply to "get past it," and psychiatric examiners on the payroll of insurance companies who denied the diagnosis in obvious cases.

The Columbine survivors face much the same. The world has moved on and expects that those who actually lived through the trauma will do the same. Even those closest to the survivors find it difficult to be patient. The husband of a school official couldn't help asking me, "Frank, isn't it time she got over it?"

Mikesell never expected to become an expert on PTSD, but now she knows it inside out. She knows about the flashbacks, the feelings of numbness, the anxiety. On the day of the shootings, she was in the glassed-in administrative area near the building's front entrance. As gunshots rang out, she ducked behind the wood paneling below the glass and hunkered there for what she believes to be about 10 minutes. The next thing she remembers is running out of the building with a group of terrified colleagues and students. Today she still struggles with feelings of guilt over whether she could have done something to prevent the slaughter.

She worried about the numbness she experienced for more than a year after the shootings. It finally seemed to wear off somewhat this summer, but in its place came pain--a combination of grief and dread that literally caused an ache in the pit of her stomach. In August, with the protective numbness gone, "the pain was more intense when I stepped into school," she said.

Barbara Monseu, who was area administrator of Jefferson County schools at the time of the shootings, was in the "on scene" command center near Columbine that day, helping to coordinate the evacuation of students and establish contact points for anguished parents. Afterward, she visited Columbine High School nearly every day until she passed the baton to Sally Blanchard last December. In that aftermath period, she said, "There were so many times when personal tragedies affected us."

She recalled how one of the parents on a committee to plan memorial services often brought her baby girl to meetings. The baby was a source of joy in otherwise somber discussions about memorials, anniversaries and policy changes associated with the trauma. "Sarah went everywhere that Ann went, and we all became very close," Monseu said. "Then baby Sarah died suddenly from a rare infection. It was devastating." This personal loss would have been keenly felt under any circumstances, but in the context of the shootings, it was almost overwhelming, reverberating in the echo chamber Columbine has become--and may likely remain--in these people's lives.

When many people are affected by PTSD at once, there may be a spirit of solidarity. "We survived together," said the school's principal, Frank DeAngelis. "We understand what others can only imagine." DeAngelis and his six assistant principals had enormous burdens last year. They had to run a school, plan memorials, coordinate counseling, revise security, assist investigators and respond diplomatically to thousands of offers of help. "There wasn't time to grieve," said assistant principal Pat Patrick. "We had too much work to do."

Because the principals' jobs require constant interaction, trust and cohesion are

necessary. Yet the principals still struggle with self-doubts and feelings of distance from one another. When one assistant principal failed to return another's phone call, the caller was beset by questions about the other's professional respect for him. Similarly, another administrator's expression of concern about a colleague's emotional well-being was misinterpreted as a questioning of her resilience and competence.

Columbine's pain was exacerbated by additional tragedies and deaths--not necessarily related to the school shootings--that swung the national spotlight back onto the community just as it felt it was moving beyond the stigma of the massacres. The mother of a girl who had been paralyzed in the shootings committed suicide. Two students were shot and killed in a convenience store. A popular basketball player hanged himself. Each shock demoralized faculty members and students.

Several people told me how newspaper and television attention to these more recent events recalled images of that April 20, even though the shootings were never mentioned. "We were putting the past behind us--then this," said administrator Blanchard. "People will think we're doomed."

Most Columbine survivors understand that strangers wish them well, and that children, parents and teachers across America want to learn about preventing and enduring such extreme events. But being the subject of overblown media coverage is unpleasant and irritating. Susan Schermerhorn, general counsel to the Jefferson County School District admitted to having "strong negative feelings about the media. They try to get the story at all costs, with what sometimes seems like little regard for the survivors' sensitivities."

Some journalists themselves were aware of this issue. A Denver Post editor assigned several reporters to interview Columbine students after the suicide of the paralyzed girl's mother. "We revolted," one reporter confided. "We wouldn't go and add to the trauma of the students." Editors, to their credit, yielded to the reporters' feelings and didn't force the issue. But that was only one newspaper. Other media outlets were not so understanding.

Like the survivors, many journalists felt the need to examine their role in Columbine and to analyze the effect of their reporting on the community. I talked to some of them at a couple of seminars at the University of Colorado last winter and spring. They admitted profound feelings of grief, guilt and anger. They knew that their jobs caused parents more pain. At the same time, they deeply resented school officials who interfered with the job of reporting. We were able to assuage some of these feelings through a project to facilitate understanding between reporters and school officials.

At the heart of the difficulty for Columbine is a certain ambivalence. Survivors earnestly want to be understood and respected. But many consider it weak and tasteless to explain their emotional pain and intellectual impairment. "Our staff, our students, want outsiders to know the facts," said principal DeAngelis. "But we're tired of telling the story."

After two graduations and two summer breaks, the administrative team is starting to expect a return to some semblance of normalcy. Last April, a watershed event occurred. Kevin Land, a nine-year Columbine veteran who served both as athletic

director and assistant principal, announced that he would leave his job in June. Until then, most of the administrators had felt they couldn't leave "before the job is done," referring to their mission of restoring confidence to Columbine. When Land told the others about his decision, the feeling of relief and gratitude in the room was palpable. One member of the team shed tears. Land's decision "makes it safe for us to think of leaving," said Mikesell.

So far, no others have openly announced such intentions, but at least now they feel they have options, rather than a sense of overwhelming obligation to remain. In the same way that the military rotates members of a traumatized unit into other jobs and positions, the members of Columbine's leadership may well benefit from a change of scene and responsibility.

The same is true for the rest of Columbine. In two years, students who were freshmen at the time of the shootings will have graduated. Teacher transfers and retirements are proceeding at a normal rate of 10 percent a year. Eventually, all those who were there that bloody day will have moved on, to other places, other pursuits. Still, wherever they go, however well they do, the shadow of Columbine will follow them.

One day, Mikesell took me to the cemetery. First we stood by the crosses memorializing the students who had been killed. Then she led me to the graveside of slain teacher Dave Sanders. A few yards away, a small tombstone marked the grave of Mikesell's son, a little boy who had had seven operations on a malformed heart.

I looked at the dates carved on his stone: 1982-1984. Long before Columbine. Long before anyone could have dreamed a Columbine would or could happen. Chris's little boy's short life hadn't had anything to do with that. But as I watched her gaze at his grave, I knew that, for her, his death would be forever a part of the trauma she knows as Columbine.

Frank Ochberg, a former associate director of the National Institute of Mental Health, is a psychiatrist who specializes in treating post-traumatic stress disorder and the effects of violence.

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