Doom Rules

ALAN PRENDERGAST | AUGUST 5, 1999

WESTWORD

There were a lot of things Melissa Sowder didn't like about Columbine High School. The bullies, for instance. They were football players, mostly. They shoved her friends in the halls and threw snowballs or bottles at them on the way home. Sometimes they shoved her, too. Who needed it?

"Teachers would see them push someone into a locker, and they'd just ignore it," she says. "I think they were afraid of the students. They didn't stop half the fights in that school."

But Columbine wasn't all bad, Sowder insists. She liked most of her teachers. And there were nice students, too--guys she met in the commons area, drinking coffee or hot chocolate and talking about what was wrong with Columbine. Guys like Eric Harris.

"I used to talk to Eric once in a while," Sowder says. "He was like the sweetest guy I ever knew. He'd do pretty much anything for people he liked. We'd talk mostly about how we got picked on, how the school was not caring what the students did. And how some people could get away with anything."

Sowder was near the bottom of the intricate social hierarchy at Columbine last fall. She was a freshman and a special-education student, struggling to get the services and classes she needed. She liked to dress in black, and most of her friends were kids who thought of themselves as outcasts--punks and goths and skaters.

Eric Harris was a senior and a very confident student. He, too, dressed in black. He had a juvenile conviction for theft and had been reported to the police for making death threats against another student on the Internet. His personal Web page crackled with fantasies of murder and revenge, and he liked to show off his extensive knowledge of guns and explosives.

Before the world that was Columbine blew up last spring, guess which one of the two attracted more scrutiny from school officials?

Right up until April 20, 1999--the day he and his buddy Dylan Klebold stormed the school, tossing pipe bombs and shooting helpless classmates, killing thirteen and injuring 23 before taking their own lives--Eric Harris was just another scowling face in the crowd. One of the most baffling aspects of the worst school massacre the country has ever seen is how Harris and Klebold's deadly plan went undetected by friends, teachers, administrators--and, apparently, their own parents--until the killings began.

The question becomes even more troubling when you consider how school authorities have dealt with Melissa Sowder, who knew Klebold and Harris only slightly. In her first few weeks at Columbine, Sowder ditched class several times, resulting in a parent conference and restrictions imposed on her ability to leave campus during the day. But when she tried to complain to teachers about harassment by jocks, she was told, "Deal with it," she says.

One day last fall, Sowder was called to the dean's office after she was late to one class. "He asked me what I think about all day at school," Sowder says, "so I told him I thought about blowing up the school. The school made me that angry. He told me I was suspended for a day and called my mom."

Diana Sowder says she spoke to her daughter about speaking and acting responsibly. But she also believes that the school "overreacted" to Melissa's remark, which officials described as a threat. Over the next few months, Melissa Sowder's movements were closely monitored by school staffers, who followed her in the halls and quizzed her if she showed up at school early or stayed late.

Sowder was in the cafeteria when Klebold and Harris began their rampage last April. She escaped unharmed, fleeing with a group of students. When classes for Columbine students resumed at Chatfield High two weeks later, she was summoned to the principal's office and informed that she might prefer home-schooling.

"I think they had kind of classified me as a troublemaker," she says. "I told them I felt okay about going back to school."

Columbine officials didn't feel okay about it, though. A counselor in a security officer's uniform followed Sowder from room to room, actually sitting through each class and observing her behavior. On her third day at Chatfield, she made a remark about the shootings to another student. According to Sowder, she'd been greeted warmly for the first time by athletes who'd formerly harassed her, so she said that maybe something positive would come out of the tragedy "because now the jocks will treat us better."

That isn't the way the school's spy system heard it. Relying on a version of the remark passed on by two students to a teacher and then administrators, a school counselor contacted Diana Sowder that day and informed her that her daughter was not to come back to Chatfield. Melissa was being removed from school because she allegedly said that "the kids who died at Columbine deserved it." Melissa denies she said any such thing, and another student who says she was present during the conversation supports her story. Steve and Diana Sowder say that they were given no chance to meet with school officials and that their daughter had no hearing--no opportunity to respond to the accusation or appeal the decision--before she was summarily booted out of school.

Jefferson County School District spokesman Rick Kaufman says he can't comment, for privacy reasons, on disciplinary actions taken against individual students. However, he acknowledges that eighteen students identified as "associates" of Klebold and Harris were offered other options, such as home-schooling, in lieu of completing the semester at Chatfield. Six accepted. After classes resumed, three students were removed from school in separate disciplinary incidents involving "comments" about the shootings.

"We take any such comments, whether they were made in jest or not, very seriously," Kaufman says, "and will do so again this fall. It's no different than someone walking through an airport and saying, 'I'm carrying a bomb.'"

Melissa Sowder says she wants to return to Columbine when classes begin August 16, but she has no idea if she will be allowed to do so. Frustrated with school officials' reluctance to meet with them, Steve and Diana Sowder have hired an attorney and are considering a lawsuit against the district over what they regard as the trampling of their daughter's rights. (Editor's note: In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that the Sowders' attorney is related to writer Alan Prendergast, who has no personal or financial interest in their case.) Yet their situation is hardly unique. Melissa says that several of her friends have been encouraged not to return to Columbine this fall, too. "I think it's because they're outcasts," she says.

Kaufman responds that he's unaware of any ongoing disciplinary process against any Columbine students. "We can't just tell anyone not to come to school," he says. "Not without following district policy."

Steve Sowder insists that the district isn't following its own rules, much less the law. "The school talks about tolerance and sensitivity, but here were these kids coming back after the shootings, and they weren't providing services," he says. "Instead, they were watching them. What they're saying and what they're doing are two different things."

But mixed signals and contradictory actions may become standard procedure when Columbine opens this month, as administrators try to come to terms with the bloody legacy of last spring. What makes someone so angry that they want to blow up their school? How do you distinguish a real threat from a cry for help? Would tough measures designed to monitor kids more closely--everything from dress codes and closed campuses to anonymous snitch lines and parental inspection of library records--prevent more violence? Or would they simply lead to more persecution of those who think and behave differently?

With Harris and Klebold dead, public outrage over their crimes has been directed at a number of convenient scapegoats: the killers' parents, the gun industry, a pop culture that celebrates killing and trivializes life. Increasingly, though, the wrath of

many parents is turning to the school district itself. They, too, are wondering: What would make someone hate their school so much that they'd try to blow it up and everyone in it?

There are people who think that school officials ignored pervasive, intolerable harassment of many students by a small group of athletes and that the harassment pushed Klebold and Harris to murder. There are also people who think officials were entirely too permissive in letting violent, deviant groups like the killers and the so-called Trenchcoat Mafia take root in the hallways, spewing hate and threats of murder. Either way, they say, the school system should be held accountable.

"As time goes on, the picture becomes clearer," says Brian Rohrbough, whose fifteen-year-old son, Daniel, was among those killed by Harris and Klebold. "The kids were running the school. There was nothing short of murder that would be challenged. And after watching the school board's response, I'm not sure even that is being challenged."

"I hate the Jeffco schools," says Randy Brown, who went to the police about Harris's death threats against his son Brooks more than a year before the shootings. "The school board is made up of accountants. They care about money and budgets and lawsuits, but they don't care about our kids at all. They want to go on like this didn't happen. They're implementing a program to correct it, but they'll never say they had a problem."

Blasted from all sides, the school district is now trying to appease both the no-more-intolerance and the too-much-tolerance factions. They're scrambling to "bullyproof" the schools and provide what Kaufman calls "diversity-type training" for athletes and their coaches and at the same time vowing to purge the schools of disruptive elements. To date, their efforts have failed to impress their critics. "This isn't a question of love and understanding and everyone will get along," says Rohrbough. "This is a question about what are the boundaries and what happens when you cross them."

To find an effective cure, though, one must first have a grasp of the disease. Many of the proposals kicked around by the school board and a community task force formed in response to the shootings seem to derive from popular impressions of "what went wrong" at Columbine, with little effort to separate fact from media myth. Yet much of what we think we know about Columbine, much of what was reported in the frantic first days of coverage and repeated endlessly since, is wrong. It's a product of overreaching and often sloppy reporting, hysterical and sometimes unreliable sources, misinformation from official sources, or just plain tabloid luridness. Examples:

* Hours after the onslaught began, an ace investigative reporter at Channel 9/KUSA announced that the Trenchcoat Mafia was a tight-knit "hate group" with national ties.

* The day after the killings, the Washington Times reported that Klebold and Harris "admired the Gothic scene and Satan worship, sometimes donning makeup in the style of one of their heroes, shock rock star Marilyn Manson. Sometimes they wore swastikas."

* Two days later, building on a sketchy report in the Denver Post, the New York Post announced that the killers "rehearsed their rampage in a morbid video they made for school," in which a trenchcoated Harris and Klebold pretended to shoot jocks.

* Just a couple of weeks ago, the Denver Rocky Mountain News reiterated that during the massacre, "Klebold and Harris said they were targeting athletes because they felt they ruled student life and needed to be brought down."

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. And wrong.
Klebold and Harris were not leaders of a close-knit hate group known as the Trenchcoat Mafia. They didn't make videos of themselves roaming the hallways of Columbine, shooting jocks. They didn't openly sport swastikas, and such attire would hardly have been permitted in their homes--Eric's father, Wayne Harris, is an Air Force veteran, and Dylan's mother, Susan, is Jewish. The boys' allegiance

was to the German techno-rock band Rammstein, not Marilyn Manson or the goth scene. And while eyewitness accounts do indicate they made remarks about jocks during their killing spree, it's hard to credit the notion that they were targeting anyone in particular on their apocalyptic suicide mission, which investigators believe was supposed to end with a fireball consuming hundreds of lives.

The carnage of April 20 is not a simple parable of humiliation and revenge, nor is it a cautionary tale of a permissive society gone mad. The mass homicide may have more to do with the special culture of Columbine, the world its students inhabited on a daily basis, than school officials will ever acknowledge. The high school that Klebold and Harris sought to destroy was a place of long-simmering resentments and pathology, wrapped in a bright lie of communal achievement and mutual respect. It's a place where teachers and parents were nominally involved but ultimately irrelevant, since adults were easy to fool or ignore. A place where teenagers were encouraged, even badgered, into straitjacketed notions of success, while others plunged into a realm of violent fantasy. A place where, as if by magic, what was considered cool and daring became unspeakably cruel and grotesque.

"People want to find the blame," says parent Victor Good, who knew both killers and their families. "They're not going to find it in any easy place."

Eric
Like a lot of gawky freshmen, you wonder where you fit in at school. You are a Columbine Rebel, proud and true, but what does that mean?

You lack your brother's bulk and stature. Three years your senior, Kevin is a tight end on the football team, an A student and a varsity man, popular and easygoing. You're nobody. Larger, more confident Rebels shove past you on the way to class, strutting in their letter jackets and white caps, high on hormones and victory. You used to love baseball, but your interest is waning. This is a problem. At Columbine the jocks rule.

You suspect you are smarter than they are. But so what? Every day you still have to wade through that mass of muscle crowding the hallways--plodding, arrogant,

contemptuous. So you rant about it on your computer. "YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE? When there is a group of assholes standing in the middle of a hallway or walkway, and they are just STANDING there talking and blocking my fucking way!!!! Get the fuck outa the way or ill bring a friggin sawed-off shotgun to your house and blow your snotty ass head off!!"

The computer is a great comfort. It's another world, one in which you can reinvent yourself, become even more powerful and intimidating than the bully boys you despise. You can hurl your rage into cyberspace, to an audience of faceless strangers, and your own parents will never know--because in this world, adults are clueless. You can do what you want, be what you want.

What you want is blood, and you find it in abundance in the wildly popular computer game Doom. Lots of boys your age vent their frustrations in waste-'em-all games like Doom, but you are more deeply entangled in its mysteries than most. Something about it--the vividness of its 3-D graphics and sound effects, the frantic pace, the demand for quick wits and savagery, the game's stoic, fatalistic attitude and all-encompassing mythology of mayhem--speaks to you. It beckons to you like a lover who can show you your true self.

The game is a gory cartoon version of your own situation. You are a badass space Marine dispatched to a distant moon, where invading demons from hell have overrun your platoon and turned your buddies into zombies bent on killing you. The only leatherneck left to defend mankind against the infernal hordes, you're outgunned from the start. But you are resourceful, and you acquire noisier, more devastating weapons as the game progresses. You wipe out the zombie soldiers and the demons who command them as you move on to higher, more intricate levels of carnage.

You master Doom and its even more violent successor, Doom 2. You engage in "deathmatch" versions of the game involving two or more players, vying on a single computer or over the Internet. It isn't enough.

You spend long hours in your room designing new levels to the game, called wads, and posting them online for other fanatics to play. You alter the noises that the weapons make, the screams of your victims. Eventually you will design fields of combat that resemble your neighborhood--and, it's rumored, your school.

It's still not enough.
You hunger for recognition. You slap a plea on the side of a building in one of the wads, urging players to send comments to your e-mail address. "This one took a damn long time to do," you write in the text file attached to another wad, "so send me some bloody credit man!"

By the middle of your sophomore year, you've completed your most sophisticated wad yet, a tricky, brutal, two-level shootout that's many times the size of your previous efforts. It climaxes in an orgy of killing, the screen flooded with hundreds of demons. The player has only two options: engage in a tedious, mechanical ritual of slaughter, or end things quickly by using a cheat command to go into "God mode," in which the player is invincible. (Later, after you are no longer around to bask in the attention, the wad will be reviewed on several Doom Web sites and ridiculed for its amateurishness, its "insipid gameplay" and "Thing overload." One reviewer will compare the experience to "viewing the clown paintings of serial killer John Wayne Gacy.")

In your America Online profile you call yourself Rebldomakr. You list your hobbies as "professional doom and doom2 creator, meeting beautiful females, being cool." Personal quote: "Shut up and shoot it.--Quit whining, it's just a flesh wound--Kill Em AALLLL!!!!"

There is no question now about who you are. You are no longer Eric Harris, pathetic dweeb. You are the Rebel who makes Doom.

Even before the killings sent reporters careening into hyperbole, Columbine had a reputation as the crown jewel of Jefferson County's high schools. Its mean SAT scores are among the highest in the state. Its motto isn't "Shut up and shoot it" but "Stretch for Excellence." A recent, $13.4 million remodeling job had provided

gleaming, ultra-modern facilities to go with what the school's fact sheet unabashedly describes as "our long history of excellence in all areas."

Yet in the wake of the massacre, many parents have come to question administrators' pride in the way Columbine operated. The abysmal failure to provide a safe environment for their kids, they say, demonstrates that the school's priorities were haywire.

"For some reason, the world talks about Columbine like it was something great," says Brian Rohrbough. "We have the evidence to show it's the worst school in the United States. I never thought the school was great, but I never thought my son would be murdered there."

At Columbine, stretching for excellence in certain areas--such as football, basketball, baseball, soccer and track--definitely yielded greater rewards than other endeavors. The school won 32 state sports championships in the 1990s, and the trophies and pictures of star athletes were on display in a glass case in the front hallway. There's no comparable shrine honoring scholars, artists, debaters, or other student achievers.

The trophy case is only the most obvious sign of the pervasive jock culture at Columbine. The school's budget for coaches' salaries alone was more than $138,000 last year, the highest in the district--including a whopping $20,000 for football. For years, critics say, top athletes enjoyed special parking privileges, received special consideration when class schedules or demands conflicted with practice routines, and were only sporadically disciplined for harassing other students.

A hefty amount of the ten-minute daily broadcast of the Rebel News Network, piped into every classroom during second period, was devoted to the exploits of the teams as they marched toward one championship after another. Last spring, one much-aired skit featured the soccer team, their hair dyed white in solidarity, kicking a ball through the halls and into classrooms. Teachers were expected to

gamely put up with such disruptions in the name of school spirit and to cut star players slack in other ways.

"When they had assemblies, that was an opportunity to hero-worship the jocks," says Victor Good, whose stepson, Nathan Dykeman, was a friend of Klebold and Harris. "The kids were not permitted to leave. And the assemblies were always for athletes, never for academics. What the hell is school spirit? Worshiping these other kids?"

Good, the chairman of the Colorado Reform Party, would like to see competitive athletics removed from the schools. Other parents aren't as quick to condemn the entire jock culture, but they do claim that a core group of athletes targeted weaker kids for bullying and ridicule.

"The bullying and harassment went on uncontrolled and throughout the school," insists Randy Brown. "This was a group of twenty kids picking on other kids, and at the bottom of the pile were Eric and Dylan. They got spit on and called 'faggots' and pushed around. Nobody did anything about it. What caused this was the school's failure to enforce their zero-tolerance policy toward harassment."

Stung by media reports about the so-called jock elite, including a scathing article in the Washington Post, school officials have denied any favoritism. A few weeks ago, Columbine principal Frank DeAngelis, a former baseball coach, even went on national television to explain how he once turned in his own son for off-field mischief. Many parents and students involved in the athletics programs also dispute the stories of marauding gangs of jocks assaulting other students at will. There were tensions between jocks and other cliques, they say, as in any school, but the situation had improved since the graduation of a few trouble-prone wrestlers and football players in 1998. (One of the leaders of the tribe, former state wrestling champ Rocky Hoffschneider, had a penchant for expensive cars that would receive special mention in Harris's online list of pet peeves: "LIARS!!! OH GAWWWWWD I HATE LIARS ...Why the fuck must people lie so damn much!

Like...My brand new hummer just broke down on the highway when I was going 250 mph.")

"I realize there aren't too many high schools in the country where you have a student who has a Viper and a Humvee," says Darryl Strahl, who's had two sons and two daughters graduate from Columbine over the past nine years. "But that had nothing to do with Columbine. I don't agree that that [bullying] attitude sprouted from or was nourished by Columbine faculty."

In her experience, Strahl says, the coaches at Columbine were also excellent teachers, including DeAngelis--"He taught my sons so much more than baseball," she says. And safety wasn't an issue, not until April 20. "In 1995 there were some kids from another school who came into the parking lot," she recalls. "Before they ever got out of the car, Jeffco [sheriff's officers] was in the parking lot, too. I personally don't have any complaints."

Yet even if actual assaults on students weren't that common, the primacy of the jocks created an atmosphere of intimidation that could be stifling at times. "There is a lot of resentment toward the jocks--and the cheerleaders, if you're a girl," says Sarah Bay, a Columbine student active in debate and theater. "The jocks get help in class, help with their homework. They want that next state championship. I know this happens, and it's not just at Columbine."

Employees of the school district say that the preferential treatment begins at administration headquarters, where rules are sometimes bent to accommodate principals eager to recruit top coaches and keep them happy. Every employee of the district is supposed to undergo fingerprinting and a background check to be hired; that requirement was waived, one source says, in the case of a former NFL player and talk-radio host who's now coaching high school football in Jefferson County. One internal 1997 memo to an employee who questioned the high salary of a particular coach instructs her that if she encounters a situation that she believes to be "in conflict with state law...or district rules, you should continue to question

athletic directors about the details. However, when a principal makes a decision on any matter, implement his/her directives immediately."

At Columbine, the message that jocks rule seeped into student life in many ways. Randy Brown says that his own son, Brooks, encountered his share of harassment and that teachers stood by while a few athletes continually cut in line in the cafeteria--a show of superiority that also earned comment on Harris's Web site. ("YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE!!!? ASSHOLES THAT CUT!!!!! Why the fuck cant you wait like every other human on earth does. Every fucking line i get into i end up having to wait a fucking hour when there WAS only me and 1 other person in line! Then the queer sucking asshole lets all his\her so called friends cut in behind em! If that happens one more time i will have to start referring to the Anarchists cookbook (bomb section)."

Students who feel bullied are supposed to take their complaints to the staff, particularly the school counselors. Columbine had six of them. But many teenagers are reluctant to take their complaints to adults out of fear of retaliation or of being branded a snitch. In any case, counseling programs throughout the district's high schools had shifted direction in recent years, partly as a matter of survival. During budget cutbacks in the early 1990s, counselors lost their lone full-time representative at administration headquarters, and the position was never restored. At the time of the shooting last April, the district was considering further cuts in the number of counselors at the middle-school level.

"Sometimes we get used as clerical workers or administrative assistants rather than doing the work we're supposed to do," says Clark Bencomo, a counselor at Green Mountain High School and president of the Jefferson County Counselors Association. "In this district, the affective needs of these kids aren't given much priority at all. That's what the community wanted."

In recent years, Bencomo says, the district's counselors were spending more time trying to provide career counseling to the whole student body rather than working with troubled kids. "We focused on getting into the classroom and downplayed

some of the social-personal issues," he says. "This tragedy is going to make us re-examine that."

The district has pledged to add more counselors now. Bencomo, of course, thinks it's a smart move. "I've had kids come in who will complain about the jocks mistreating them, particularly the kids with the black fingernail polish, the goth people," he says.

"They say, 'They call us dirts.' These may not all be horrible things, but they add up, and you become disenfranchised."

In the absence of an appeal to adult authority, students figured out their own way of dealing with the oppressive aspects of Columbine. One response was the Trenchcoat Mafia, a haphazard group of nonconformists who took to wearing the jocks' sneering nickname for them as a badge of honor, along with their black dusters. They were geeks and goths, oddballs and losers; only one or two exuded even a faint aura of menace. And they were far more likely to be targeted for ridicule than most students.

Principal DeAngelis has said that he never heard of the Trenchcoat Mafia before April 20--despite the ad they took out in the 1998 yearbook begging others to notice them ("Insanity's healthy!"), despite the fact that several members of the group were suspended, expelled or flunked out that same year. The statement has prompted much eye-rolling among DeAngelis's critics; to them, it's part of an official campaign to deny that anything was less than perfect at Columbine--right up there with the principal's boast that, when investigators searched every locker in the school following the shooting, they failed to turn up any drugs or weapons. ("That he would even say that is pretty amazing to us," says Rohrbough. "Nobody's talking about how many drugs were found in the cars.") Recently DeAngelis told a Denver Rocky Mountain News reporter that he was aware of "some kids wearing black dusters" but not of the harassment claims; yet even his supporters don't understand how an administrator as ubiquitous as DeAngelis, always roaming the

halls and dropping in on classes, could fail to take note of such an exhibitionistic crew and ponder what it might mean.

"I can't imagine he wouldn't have noticed eight or nine kids wearing trenchcoats in May," says Strahl.

But the group's seeming invisibility may explain why few people paid any attention to the increasingly bizarre behavior of Klebold and Harris. If school officials weren't particularly interested in the problems of a few purple-haired types--some of whom were chronically ditching school, obsessing on madness and suicide and all but wearing signs around their necks screaming "TROUBLED YOUTH"--then it's unlikely that they would take much notice of other black-coated students.

Klebold and Harris didn't dye their hair or wear makeup; by most accounts, they didn't even adopt the fashion statement of black dusters until last fall, after most of the Trenchcoat crowd had left Columbine. They were not leaders of the group and had only a tenuous relationship to it, through their friendship with one key member. They certainly didn't share the group's desire to revel in their outcast status.

Several students who knew Klebold and Harris as classmates or even as friends have trouble with the notion that they were really outcasts at all. Most of the Columbine population comes from a single middle school, a situation that would seem to encourage long-term friendships and rivalries, yet the school's cliques were actually more fluid than most media reports indicate. Harris kept mostly to himself, but Klebold had a wide range of friends, from skaters and stoners to preps and even jocks.

The two participated in school-spirit skits on the Rebel News Network. Klebold volunteered to do the sound for school plays and one time scrambled to correct a technical problem in order to save a performance by Rachel Scott, who would later become one of the first casualties of April 20. Harris made good grades and got along well with most of his teachers; he presented his composition teacher with a Christmas present last year. Both teenagers may have complained bitterly about the jocks on occasion, but it's possible to conclude that the two actually liked school--

or, at least, certain aspects of it. (From Harris's list: "YOU KNOW WHAT I LOVE!!!? SCHOOL! YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE!!!? SCHOOLWORK!")

"I never saw them being hostile or dissing on other people," says Jeni LaPlante, Darry Strahl's youngest daughter.

LaPlante had several classes with Harris her junior and senior years, as well as a bowling class with Harris and Klebold. Her two closest friends worked with them at Blackjack Pizza, and she frequently went with them to Rock 'n Bowl at Belleview Lanes on weekends. She considered the pair to be "out of the ordinary"--but then, there were a lot of people who were a little unusual at Columbine. She didn't see anything terribly disturbing about them. She continued to think that up until the morning of April 20; she was outside the school when terrified students began pouring out and running for cover.

"I never saw this coming," she says. "It hit me hard, because I didn't ever see a problem at Columbine. It was the all-American school. It had different cliques, but that was also diversity."

Eric Harris, in particular, remains an enigma to LaPlante. He was so...involved in class, always had his hand up. Wouldn't put in his two cents unless nobody else spoke up, but he knew every single answer. Grammar, Shakespeare, class discussion on whatever--he always had an opinion, always was polite about it.

LaPlante asked him why he was putting himself through the grief of college-prep classes when he was planning to enlist in the Marines, and he told her, "I probably won't go." But if he was planning to blow up the school for a year, like people say, why was he working so hard in school? Why was he struggling over a research paper that wasn't due until after April 20? Why was he talking about what he was going to write in his college application essay?

"The only way I can explain it is that he was just two perfectly different people," she says. "What he showed to the rest of the world and what he kept to his garage or his computer were so different."

A few months before his death, Harris had changed his AOL screen name to Reb Domine--no longer just a Rebel Doommaker, but the Lord of the Rebels. Hobbies: "making fun of you people." Occupation: "senior at CHS and the rest is still unpublished." Personal quote: "its fun being schizophrenic."

That Harris and Klebold were leading a double life is a familiar theme among those who thought they knew them well. "The most horrifying thing is that these kids didn't have the signs they want to point to," says Victor Good, who frequently saw the pair when they visited his stepson. "Eric was always the perfect little gentleman. He seemed more mature than other kids."

Yet there were signs, from the essays they wrote in class to the T-shirts they wore, the random comments about bombs and killing, the pictures with their hands cocked as if cradling a weapon and preparing to shoot the photographer. That these expressions of malevolence seem sinister only in hindsight says a great deal about what passed for normal--or even "out of the ordinary" but readily accepted--at Columbine.

They were hiding in plain sight, perfectly camouflaged in the undercurrent of trash and violence swimming in your average 2,000-student suburban high school. Resentment of jocks? Nobody had a corner on that concession. Videos featuring car crashes and explosions? Finding ways to emulate the special effects of big-budget action thrillers was part of the challenge of video production classes. (In one video for a marketing class, the pair offered to provide a protection service and simulated shooting someone.) Klebold's interest in Charles Manson? Wild-eyed Charlie has become a popular research topic in high schools nationwide; the shock value alone is worth at least a grade point or two.

Weird T-shirts and an affection for gloom-and-doom rock lyrics? Nothing new here, even though the duo's embrace of one German band's ludicrous paeans to mass murder ("You in the schoolyard/I'm ready to kill and nobody here knows of my loneliness...We announce Doomsday/There will be no mercy/Run, run for your

lives...You believe killing might be hard/But where are all the dead coming from") was so intense that other kids referred to them as the Rammstein Boyz.

Bragging about coming across bomb instructions on the Internet and coming up with new ways to kill people? Lots of kids talk about stuff like that.

Reportedly, at least one English teacher did find a Klebold short story about a killing so disturbing that she contacted his parents. Harris's parents were notified about a similar story. But these were only stories, the boys insisted. Fantasies. As long as the violence exists only in the mind, who cares? Why not stories about multiple homicides? Stretch for excellence.

In a school full of kids desperate to stand out, two killers in training did not seem remarkable at all.

Dylan

Sarah Bay: "From the start, I saw Dylan as a follower. If he got an idea from someone that he thought was cool, he'd go along with it, as long as that other person was doing it, too."

Jeni LaPlante: "He did have a lot of anger, but he hid it most of the time. One time in bowling class, he got so pissed he slammed his fist down on the ball return. It freaked me out."

Sarah Bay: "In a way, Dylan's mind was still back in junior high, where girls were yucky and video games were cool and you sort of had this fantasy land you could go to."

Everyone sees you as a follower. True, when it comes to the usual adolescent rites of passage--smoking, drinking, seeking out music obnoxious enough to annoy your parents--you aren't exactly a trendsetter. But when you find something that really fires your brain, you embrace it with enthusiasm. Hence your nickname, borrowed from the magic elixir that produces so many weepy late-night phone conversations with friends: VoDkA.

People remember that shy, vulnerable, teen-angst side of you, so they make excuses for you. You must have been drawn into Eric's orbit, brainwashed somehow, they say. You did not have that kind of hate in you. Hell, you were still making trades in the fantasy baseball league with Tim Kastle the night before the massacre; hours later, you were waving a TEC-9 at him in a ceiling crawlspace, trying to make up your mind whether to shoot. You must have had some kind of psychotic break to switch from good old Dylan to a head case like that in a matter of hours.

They want it to be simple--little Eric the evil mastermind, and you trailing after him, towering over him, a six-three zombie in a black coat, shades and a turned-around Boston Red Sox cap--Dr. Rammstein and his monster. They don't understand the bonds between VoDkA and Reb. They don't understand that he needed you as much as you needed him, maybe more so. Like prisoners manacled together, you reinforced each other in your misery. Together you could accomplish things you wouldn't dream of attempting alone.

The relationship begins the way a lot of adolescent friendships do, as a buffer against loneliness and the grim demands of growing up. You play Doom and Quake, cruise the malls, take a lot of the same classes. You cultivate a mutual interest in death-rock and Tarantino movies, ape the casual attitude toward racism and violence that you see on the screen. None of this is terribly unusual, but at some point you recognize something in each other that most of your friends don't share: a boiling rage against your enemies.

The more time you spend in each other's company, the more enemies you seem to have. Other kids call you faggots. They misunderstand. What you are is a two-man terror squad.

"Ok people, im gonna let you in on the big secret of our clan," Reb writes on his Web page. "We aint no god damn stupid ass quake clan! We are more of a gang. We plan out and execute missions. Anyone pisses us off, we do a little deed to their house. Eggs, teepee, superglue, busyboxes, large amounts of fireworks, you name it

and we will probly or already have done it. We have many enimies in our school, therefor we make many missions."

In your junior year of high school you embark on several nighttime raids. Both you and Reb have curfews, but your parents are busy people and it's easy to sneak out. You drive to Wyoming to load up on fireworks, extract the gunpowder and make pipe bombs. You set them off in the fields and ravines surrounding your parents' stunning house in Deer Creek Canyon. The secret is exciting, in part because you share it. It's one more wedge separating the "gang" from everyone else.

In January 1998, the two of you are caught in a field with stolen electronic equipment. This is your first encounter with the legal system, the world of adult laws and adult consequences, and it's a joke. You enter a diversion program, write a letter of apology, pick up trash for no pay, pee in a cup. You are polite to the judge and feed your folks some corn syrup about how much you're learning from all this. Your probation officer sees you as a dreamy slacker who just needs to get cracking: "Dylan is a bright young man...if he is able to tap his potential and become self motivated he should do well in life."

By senior year, the amount of time you spend with Eric Harris would be scary, if it didn't seem so right. You share four classes, work together at Blackjack Pizza, make videos, go bowling and spend long hours on the computer together. Your attachment to him creates inevitable conflicts with your other friends, many of whom you've known much longer than Harris, a relative latecomer to the south Jeffco scene. When you must choose between them, you choose Eric.

Many of your friends are getting into dating now, getting serious with girls. It's one place you can't follow. This social stuntedness is another quality that the two of you share, that isolates you from the rest--but at least Reb had a girlfriend once, before the gang of two was formed, a girl named Tiffany. (When Tiffany broke up with him, Harris staged a fake-suicide scene for her benefit.) You can't score a date to save your life.

A platonic friend, an honors student who likes you so much that she bought guns for you, pleads with you to take her to the prom. Your parents offer you $250 to go. You agree. For a few hours you're in the social whirl, and Eric Harris is nowhere to be seen. He shows up later, at the after-prom party, with no date.

There is no escape from each other. With all that you know about each other now, all that you share, how can you go your separate ways? People want to say that Eric Harris is the problem. They don't get it.

Graduation is the problem.

Shaking his head, Randy Brown flips through the paperwork connected to a complaint he filed with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department against Eric Harris more than a year before the shootings at Columbine. He points to an Internet address the deputy wrote down incorrectly and to a street address for Eric Harris that's also wrong.

"This shows how little they investigated this," he says. "We thought this was serious. We changed the exterior lighting on our house because of this. The detective didn't do his job. How big a red flag does a professional need?"

Brown's story, which he has repeated patiently to reporters from around the country, poses an uncomfortable challenge to school and law-enforcement officials. How could they fail to recognize that Eric Harris was dangerous, Brown wonders, when he brought a bundle of red flags to authorities months before the massacre?

Brown's complaint went nowhere. His criticism of the sheriff's office and school administrators has been largely ignored. After the massacre, his oldest son, Brooks, was treated as a possible suspect because he told reporters that Harris warned him away from the school moments before the shooting started. The Browns paid for a private polygraph exam to establish that Brooks had no prior knowledge of the attack. Brooks passed. Sheriff John Stone told reporters he was still "suspicious" of Brooks Brown.

Randy Brown has no doubts about his son's innocence. But plenty of people had cause to be suspicious of Eric Harris, he says. They just did nothing about it.

Brooks Brown and Dylan Klebold grew up together. The arrival of Eric Harris, though, gradually began to strain the friendship. Late in 1997 the Browns learned that Harris was attempting to blame the vandalism of a neighbor's house--the same kind of midnight mission that VoDkA and Reb were conducting regularly at that point--on Brooks. But Brooks had an ironclad alibi that night, Randy says; he was grounded.

The Browns told the neighbor of their suspicions about Eric's involvement in the vandalism. Furious, Harris threw a piece of ice at Brooks's car and cracked the windshield. The Browns called the police, and Brooks decided to have a word with Wayne and Kathy Harris.

"Brooks got mad and told his parents everything Eric was doing," Brown says. "Eric's drinking. His sneaking out at night."

Brown recalls that Kathy Harris was "all upset" about her son's behavior--at first. "She called back the next day and said, 'My husband said it's not that serious'--that he basically trusted his son."

Wayne Harris drove Eric to the Brown house and waited in the car while his son offered a begrudging apology. Eric left angrily after Randy's wife, Judy, questioned his sincerity. "He didn't fool my wife, but he fooled me and everybody else," Randy says.

Not long after the windshield fracas, Dylan urged Brooks to check out Eric's Web page. Under the heading "Philosophy" was an unmistakable message.

"I am the law, if you don't like it, you die...Dead people cant do many things, like argue, whine, bitch, complain, narc, rat out, criticize, or even fucking talk. So that's the only way to solve arguments with all you fuckheads out there, I just kill! God I cant wait till I can kill you people...I don't care if I live or die in the shootout, all I

want to do is kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can, especially a few people. Like Brooks Brown."

There was more: "You all better fucking hide in your houses because im comin for EVERYONE soon, and i WILL be armed to the fuckin teeth and i WILL shoot to kill and i WILL fucking KILL EVERYTHING! No i am not crazy, crazy is just a word...if you got a problem with my thoughts, come tell me and ill kill you."

Also on the site was a description of pipe bomb missions and one of Eric's Doom wads, the layout designed to resemble the Browns' neighborhood.

The Browns downloaded the materials and contacted the sheriff's office. "We didn't take it to the dad, and I have second-guessed that decision since this happened," Randy says. "We said, 'Look, every time we report this kid, it escalates.' We told them, 'You can't go to Eric directly.' If you go to the school, the stupid counselors bring them into a room and say, 'Eric and Brooks, we see you're having a problem.' That doesn't work with Eric. We were afraid of him, okay? We told them they didn't need to say where they got this information--it's on the Web. They said, 'We don't even know if this is a crime.'"

Much to Brown's dismay, the sheriff's department never interviewed the Harris family about the threat. An investigator couldn't locate Harris's Web site, either because Harris took the material offline or because the address was copied wrong. Several phone calls the Browns made to the investigator went unreturned. Although a copy of the "suspicious incident" report was forwarded to the deputy assigned to Columbine High, no official action was taken as a result.

After the massacre, as news of Brown's report began to make headlines, sheriff's department officials vigorously defended its handling of the case. A computer check had failed to turn up Harris's previous juvenile theft conviction, they said, and Brown's request that investigators not contact various individuals involved in the case, including Brooks and Harris himself, had tied their hands: "Without the ability to speak to a victim or positively identify a suspect, elements of a crime could not be established."

Randy Brown says he made no such blanket request. "We didn't want to be contacted? That's absurd," he snaps. "We wanted them to go to Eric's parents. Why would we take it to the police if we didn't want them to do anything?"

Brown also insists that the investigator assigned to the case, John Hicks, told him he already had a file on a juvenile named Eric Harris. Even if the threats and accounts of setting off explosives and vandalizing houses weren't enough to file charges, Brown says, they should have been brought to the attention of school administrators and the people supervising Harris's probation. Such action could have resulted in a search warrant, revocation of probation--or, at the very least, a reassessment of Harris's progress in the anger-management classes required by his juvenile diversion program. ("Eric did a very nice job on Diversion," his supervisor reported. "He impressed me as being very articulate and intelligent.")

Frustrated by official inaction, Brown lived several weeks in anticipation of bad news. "You get used to checking your house for pipe bombs," he says.

Gradually, the sense of danger receded. Brooks was still friends with Dylan Klebold--"There were a lot of kids my kids knew that we worried about, and Dylan wasn't one of them," Brown says--and everyone thought that Dylan might have a "calming effect" on Harris. Two weeks before the shootings, Brooks informed his parents that he'd made a separate peace with Eric, too, that his former nemesis was acting more grown-up these days.

He was also acting more cautious. In the spring of 1998 Harris removed some of the more explicitly violent writings from his Web site--tipped off by Dylan, perhaps, that the Brown family was reading them. He still talked about wanting to blow up the school, but he was careful of his audience. Unlike Melissa Sowder, he didn't make the mistake of saying such things to the dean.

Around the same time, he began to keep a handwritten journal of his plans for an attack on Columbine High. Investigators have released few details about the journal, but it appears to be an evolving manual of possible weapons and tactics, with lists of hated athletes thrown in for good measure--a crash course in applied

Doom. As the months wore on, the imagined carnage became more and more extreme, an exit strategy Reb and VoDkA could embellish upon whenever they'd had a bellyful of bullshit.

One element that appears to be missing from the journal is any clear rationale or motive for the plan. "A lot of it, it's hard to discern fantasy from reality," says Steve Davis, spokesman for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department. "For example, the part about taking the plane and crashing it into New York City--who knows? We may never know how much of it was an actual plan and how much of it was just talking. I don't think there's any real explanation that we're getting from that diary."

Yet the date chosen for the attack--April 20, Adolf Hitler's birthday--is one kind of explanation. Harris's fascination with Hitler is debatable; he and Klebold may have offered 'Heil Hitler' salutes after bowling strikes, but not often enough to attract much comment. Yet Harris did embrace a kind of social Darwinism any Nazi could appreciate: "YOU KNOW WHAT I LOVE!!!? Natural SELECTION!!!!!!!! God damn its the best thing that ever happened to the Earth. Getting rid of all the stupid and weak orginisms...but its all natural!! YES!"

Harris had a T-shirt that read "Natural Selection." According to some students, he was wearing it the day he died. The fantasy of wiping out the inferior "dumbasses" who got in his way was at the heart of his megalomania. In his inscription of Nathan Dykeman's 1998 yearbook--a seriously deranged note, peppered with lyrics from Rammstien ("God damn not an angel when I die"), references to Doom ("kick some, take some, and get some"), and German phrases proclaiming "No pity" and "I am God"--he offers this piece of advice: "Hey don't follow your dreams or goals or any of that shit. Follow your fucking animal instincts. If it moves, kill it. If it doesn't, burn it."

As the fantasy grew, reality receded. At some point the plan was no longer about revenge against jocks but about taking down the whole school--and themselves with it. There would be no God mode once they started shooting, Harris realized. In what appear to be later writings about the attack, he refers to the event as "NBK"--

possibly a reference to Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers, a movie about people born to kill--and expresses a fatalistic detachment about what is to come.

One document, consisting of three pages about building and storing pipe bombs, was obtained by several Web surfers from Harris's site within hours of the attack, before America Online took down the account. Investigators won't confirm its authenticity, but several internal clues suggest it is Harris's own writing. In discussing ways to add shrapnel to the bombs, the author writes, "I am not sure that method works. I did try it on the Delta batch, and since they won't be used until NBK it'll be kind of hard to report the results. You might try asking the survivors if they got a good look at the bomb before it went off and then the remains!"

Several people who knew Klebold and Harris have suggested that something must have happened in the last few weeks of their lives--Harris's rejection by the Marines or being turned down by three girls he asked to the prom, perhaps--that prompted them to carry out their fantasy of doom. Yet the tangible preparations for NBK, including buying guns and training with them, building bombs and figuring out ways to conceal them in their dusters, had been going on for months. And the rumblings Harris was posting on his Web page and scratching in people's yearbooks a year ahead of time can't be dismissed as mere posturing; these are the works of someone already losing his way back to a world where other people might matter.

He may not have been the only member of the Harris household fighting a losing battle with reality. According to Nathan Dykeman, who sold his story to the National Enquirer and then claimed that the tabloid distorted many details, Wayne Harris found a pipe bomb in Eric's room last year, possibly as a result of his conversation with Brooks Brown. Whatever punishment Harris may have meted out to his son--who was already on probation, taking anti-depressants and seeing a psychiatrist--it didn't include calling the police.

April 20, 1999

They shot one young man in the back as he tried to run away, shot another in the

face as he lay writhing on the ground, crying for help. They shot young women in the head as they crouched meekly under library tables. They giggled like little boys setting off firecrackers and snarled like hit men. And when it came to deciding who to kill and who to spare, they were as capricious as gods.

Despite the endless blow-by-blow accounts of the massacre, heartbreaking questions remain about what actually happened on April 20. Until the authorities see fit to release the autopsy reports, for example, it's impossible to know if teacher Dave Sanders and several critically wounded students might have been saved by more aggressive action by the SWAT teams or if the painfully cautious response was justified, as officials have maintained.

This much is clear: Whatever plans Klebold and Harris might have had to settle a score with jocks, whatever they might have said in the library ("All jocks stand up!"), the attack itself was vicious, cowardly and utterly random. Several of the injured and dead had scarcely been at Columbine long enough to make friends, let alone enemies, and had never even met the killers.

Whoever came into their line of fire was fair game. They killed Isaiah Shoels because he was black. They reportedly said something to Kyle Velasquez about being "pathetic" and killed him, too. They had become executioners on behalf of the caste system they despised. Anyone they didn't like, anyone who looked different...to them, these weren't people, but targets in the ultimate death match.

If they'd succeeded in setting off the propane bomb they planted in the school kitchen, they would have killed many more, including dozens of classmates who'd thought of them as their friends. Instead, they retreated to the library and took their own lives before the reality of what they'd done could sink in. They would leave that for the injured and their families and the families of the dead.

It was an obscene day in Colorado. For many survivors, the terrible violence they endured was followed by one more shock--the shock of recognition. Nobody had dreamed that such a thing could happen here. But when students were given the descriptions of the shooters, dozens of them nodded their heads in understanding.

Oh yeah, they said. Those guys.

A dozen members of the Columbine community gather in Steve Schweitzberger's kitchen on the Fourth of July. Some are wearing "Flush Howard Stern" T-shirts. An elderly woman passes around an antique print bearing the Ten Commandments, which she would like to see prominently displayed in schools. A man in a baseball cap sings along to a tape of "Columbine, Friend of Mine," the song written by two students in remembrance of the shooting victims, playing on a boombox.

Ron Aigner, the man who's proposed building a fifteen-story memorial to the victims in the shape of a cross on land he owns within Roxborough State Park, complains to a Westword reporter about a recent illustration on the cover of the newspaper depicting a tennis player with horns. "You represent the devil," he says.

Schweitzberger has his own plans for a memorial at the school's back door. A former Denver mayoral candidate, Littleton real-estate investor and a Columbine parent--his sixteen-year-old daughter, Sara, escaped unharmed on April 20--he's vowed to devote the next year of his life to raising funds to help the victims' families and to erect a permanent shrine on Rebel Hill, the mound in Clement Park across from the school where thousands paid their respects in the weeks after the massacre. His plans call for a single cross and a visitors' center in the shape of a Columbine ribbon. So far, though, his efforts to purchase the hill from the county have met with a less than enthusiastic response from local officials.

"I moved out of Denver because I was tired of the city council," he says, "and now it's the same thing--people with attitudes who won't even give me a call."

Like a lot of conservatives stirred to action by the massacre, Schweitzberger sees the violence of April 20 as symptomatic of a larger breakdown in social values rather than a reflection of the bully-boy jock culture at Columbine. "The two killers had a perfectly good coach available, Coach Sanders," he says. "They chose Coach Hitler. We've been preaching tolerance. Why should we have to tolerate something like that?

"From what I know, the school was doing its job. But you take a little poison from Howard Stern and a little violence from Jerry Springer and this stuff on the Internet--I'm not for censorship, but how much of this are we supposed to take? Sure, there ought to be some local heroes who aren't capable of throwing the ball sixty yards. But how do you pick Adolf Hitler as a role model?"

The killings, he believes, are a watershed event that will prompt parents and students nationwide to become more involved in shaping the values of their schools. "We are no longer Generation X or Y," Schweitzberger declares. "We are the Columbine Generation, people of all ages who will not apologize for our faith, who will pay more attention to what's going on in the schools. Whenever a Columbine student has something to say for the next three years, the class that my daughter is in, the world will tune in."

Yet there seems to be little consensus within the community about how to stem the plague of school violence. Some grassroots groups are pushing gun legislation; others want increased security, a battery of checkpoints to protect students from enemies foreign and domestic; still others promote hug-a-thons and diversity clubs as ways to defuse hatred before it explodes. The school district has moved cautiously, tightening security policies--for example, allowing staffers to "interrogate" students without a parental presence if parents can't be reached--while denying that the moves have anything to do with the massacre.

A community task force has devised a bolder set of recommendations for Jeffco schools, but several of the more sweeping proposals, including a strict dress code ("underwear may not show...no camouflage") and closed campuses, have been greeted with skepticism by many of the group's own members. (At one recent meeting of the task force, Principal DeAngelis pointed out that Columbine couldn't close its campus and still feed all of its 1,900 students without extending the school day substantially.)

"I'm hearing from the schools [an emphasis on] 'tolerance and inclusiveness,' and I'm hearing from the parents 'character and respect,'" says Don Lee, the state

legislator who organized the task force. "There seems to be a philosophical difference there."

Some parents believe that the Jefferson County school district, the largest in the state and one of the largest in the country, is simply too unwieldy and bureaucratic to be responsive to their concerns. Randy Brown, who recently called on the school board to resign, would like to see the district dissolved into several smaller, more locally accountable agencies.

"The bureaucracy doesn't bend, and apathetic parents like me let them get away with it," he says. "You want to stop the public anger over this, so you break into eighty committees and have them do nothing until things quiet down."

Brian Rohrbough supports some of the measures that have been discussed, such as an anonymous tip line for students. "The kids need to have some kind of board of independent parents that they can contact when they see things going on that shouldn't happen," he says. "There has to be some way for accountability to take place."

Yet Rohrbough, too, believes that the district has been expending more energy on ducking criticism than on making positive changes in response to the shootings. He points to the emotional issue of whether to reopen the Columbine library, where ten victims died. The district had drawn up plans for some minor changes in the site and was preparing to show them to the public when victims' families protested; the question of what to do with the library remains on hold.

"The decision of what to do with that location should be left up to the parents whose kids were murdered or wounded there," Rohrbough says. "But this was like everything else they've done. They've left the parents out of the process."

Columbine students are feeling left out, too. Security at Chatfield during the final weeks of classes was so airtight that some students scribbled "Chatfield Prison" on their IDs and grumbled about being treated like cattle. Students have only minimal representation on Lee's task force, and that's alarming to those who see the

proposed crackdown as a threat to their privacy and their rights of free expression. Some fear that Columbine could become a more hostile environment than it ever was before.

"We hardly have a voice on this task force, and we're going to have to endure this, not them," says Sarah Bay. "This is mostly for the parents to feel safe, not for us. I know people who are afraid of going back to school because of the way they're going to be treated."

More than any survey or research study, the tragedy at Columbine has exposed the uneasy gulf between parents and their children in middle America. Anonymous tip lines, monitoring of reading materials and other traditional tools of the thought police are being pressed into service as parents seek to find a way into a secret world of adolescence they no longer recognize.

"They ought to be focusing on kids who are violent, not just different," says one goth sophomore, who asked that her name not be used. "I may go to school in my black lipstick, and the people in the halls part like the Red Sea. But I've never physically threatened anyone in that school. Why should I be singled out?"

Tomorrow

Today you are the poster boys of Satan, leading examples of gun craziness, symbols of the virus racing through our blood-soaked culture. You made the cover of Time as "The Monsters Next Door."

But your moment of infamy is passing. Tomorrow it will be someone else. A racist in Illinois. A handyman in California. A day trader in Georgia.

Your legacy is fear and grief and nightmares. Parents in mourning. A brave teacher slain as he sought to save kids. Young lives cut short. Others scarred and savaged by the attack, some trapped in bodies that no longer work right.

It is all so horrific that some people would like to erase all trace of you, dreading that you will attain cult status--especially in cyberspace, where there is something for everyone. Yet it seems best to remember your cruelty as proof of what raw-

boned boys can do when they put their damaged minds to it. People may loathe you or forgive you, attempt to explain you or dismiss you, but the cruelty is a revelation to us all.

How to honor the people you murdered and injured has become a matter of paramount importance. It has sparked an outpouring of compassion and financial help and a ring of Web sites pledged to "Remember Forever." Some of the tributes are tacky. Some celebrate the dead as heroes and martyrs. These are easy labels that those who knew them best have resisted--not just because, like all of us, they led imperfect lives, but because they deserve to be remembered for who they were, not simply as victims.

Something to remember: They were at school that day because that was where they went to learn and work and grow. Until the moment you arrived, they relied on the kind of unwritten contract that makes civilization possible. They thought that their school was safe, that adults knew how to deal with injustice and violence in their midst.

They were under the impression that, whatever accommodations they had to make to get along at Columbine, the rules didn't include mass murder.