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## Columbine 20th anniversary: Lessons learned

It's been 20 years since two gunmen entered Columbine High School, killing 13 people, injuring dozens more and leaving a community and a school struggling to find a way forward.



Sara Hertwig

Davin Stafford, 16, reads plaques at the Columbine Memorial with the names of those lost on April 20, 1999. This week marks 20 years since the tragedy shook not just the community but the nation.

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But in those 20 years, the surviving students and staff, as well as the family and friends of those lost, have worked tirelessly to reclaim the space and show that hope and healing are possible.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Gerda Weissmann Klein, a Holocaust survivor, spoke to Columbine students. She shared her stories of pain and trauma, and told the students that they would get through it, former Principal Frank DeAngelis recalls.

"At Columbine High School, you're going to be able to turn hatred into love and enlightenment. And you're going to be a guiding light for the rest of the world," DeAngelis remembers her saying. "And that rings out 20 years later. And that, I think, is what Columbine represents."

### **Moving through the grief**

When a person experiences trauma, there is no right way to begin moving forward, and there's no real moving on.

"I'm not going to say move on because you don't move on. You move through," said Dawn Anna, who lost her 18-year-old daughter, Lauren

Townsend, on April 20, 1999.

“You move forward,” added her husband, Bruce Beck. “Moving on means you’re leaving somebody behind. We never left Lauren behind.”

Craig Scott lost his sister, Rachel. He was in the school’s library during the shooting and witnessed friends die in front of him. In working through what happened that day, Scott felt anger, sadness, grief and a little bit of fear.

“But these emotions ... can work for you,” he said. “You can actually neurologically translate emotions. They can translate from one thing to another. You can take anger and turn it into determination. You can turn sadness into an appreciation for life. You can turn fear into courage or anxiety into excitement.”

### **Finding meaning**

In learning to cope with the new normal, survivors and family members have taken vastly different paths to healing. Healing is a unique journey for everyone.

“Sometimes, just getting out of bed is enough,” said Coni Sanders, who lost her father, Dave Sanders. “This is no race. This is no competition for who can do the best with the worst.”

Some, like Dawn Anna, Rick Townsend and Bruce Beck, have started foundations in honor of loved ones lost or inspired by what happened. Others, like Tom Mauser, who lost his son, Daniel, have become outspoken advocates for gun control.

Yet others, like Coni Sanders, have worked to make sense of it all in a much different way. She now runs a mental health agency where she helps people who have been convicted of violent crimes as they’re getting out of prison, diversion programs or probation.

And most – at least those who can now share their story – offer an ear and a hopeful message when communities experience something similar and begin picking up the pieces.

That’s exactly why Heather Martin, a 1999 graduate of Columbine High School, began The Rebels Project, a nonprofit organization that connects and supports survivors of mass tragedy and trauma. And it’s why DeAngelis always makes himself available when survivors need to talk.

"It's going to be a tough road," DeAngelis has told others. "It's a marathon and not a sprint. But you're going to find a light at the end of the tunnel. We're living proof of that 20 years later."

### **Writing a new story**

Although Columbine wasn't the first school shooting, it's become arguably the most well known in large part because of the media coverage and the ability of the public to follow along in real time.

However, for those associated with the school, Columbine is so much more than what happened on April 20, 1999.

"I think it's a story of triumph over tragedy, good over evil. It's a story of a community bonding together and just being determined to be successful, to rebuild ... and I think 20 years marks that," current principal Scott Christy said.

"I want Columbine to be known for today. I don't want that day to be lost or forgotten, but I just think it should serve as hope for everyone who has experienced tragedy. That you can be successful again. You can thrive again. I just hope that through this 20-year anniversary that people see that," he added.

Those lost and those left to continue their legacy serve as a model of resiliency and hope, an example for those who may experience something similar and wonder whether they'll ever be able to put one foot in front of the other.

It's been two decades, but from its spot near the glorious Colorado Front Range, Columbine continues to be a beacon.

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Didn't play arcade games or pinball

Played. Spent about \$1-2 weekly.

Played all the time. There was no limit to the quarters in my pocket.

