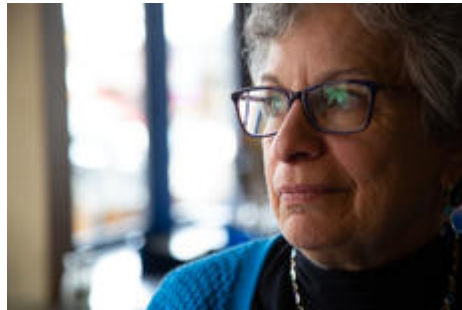


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Columbine 20th anniversary: Retired schools communications team member recalls tragedy

Marilyn Saltzman vividly remembers the events of April 20, 1999, and the aftermath – and says she learned lessons in all aspects of her life from the experience.



Sara Hertwig

Marilyn Saltzman was a member of the communications team for Jeffco Schools when the Columbine tragedy happened. It would be 14 months – June 2000 – before her department had its first day without calls about the tragedy.

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“It was a life-changing experience in terms of my career and personally,” said the 71-year-old Conifer resident, who was part of Jeffco Public Schools communications team. “The pain subsides, but the impact lasts forever. I’ve seen the goodness in people and the horrors.”

For Saltzman, who retired in 2002 after 20 years in the school district’s communications department, one of the biggest lessons was the need to build relationships. She explained that before the shootings at Columbine High School, school district communications professionals had never met public information officers from police and fire departments, hospitals, the county, park districts and others who were ultimately involved in the response after the shootings.

Now the PIOs meet regularly and have become friends and colleagues, she said, so they know who to call when any event –

positive or negative — occurs.

Relationships with local media were vital, and district officials tended to respond to their requests first rather than the national media because relationships were already established.

“You can’t get star-struck by the national media,” she added.

In 1999, communications professionals talked about the 24-hour news cycle and providing updates in that time frame.

“The world has changed,” she said. “Now (the news cycle) is so instant,” adding that the communication after the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., in 2018 was done really well. “Parkland learned how to use the media in the best sense of the word.”

Never prepared “You’re never prepared for something like this,” Saltzman said. “You don’t think it will happen to you. For a long time, it was just one foot in front of the other.”

She remembers the first day that her office didn’t field a call regarding the Columbine shootings: in June 2000 — 14 months after the incident.

“The calls ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous,” she said.

At first, the office fielded primarily calls from the news media but also calls from people wanting to help and express their condolences — including a woman who had a foal born on April 20, 1999, and wanted to give the horse to the school.

Other calls weren’t as good-hearted with people wanting to use the incident to further their own agendas, she said.

“People were looking for simple answers to a complicated problem,” she said. “Here we are 20 years later, and (school shootings) are still happening.”

For a time after her retirement, Saltzman consulted with school districts across the country about crisis communication — and she helped the Platte Canyon School District when Emily Keyes was killed in 2006 at Platte Canyon High School.

Saltzman never refers to the shooting as simply “Columbine.” Instead, she always calls it the “Columbine tragedy” because, she

explained, "Columbine High School is much more than just the shooting."

Contact Deb Hurley Brobst at deb@evergreenco.com or 303-350-1041.

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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.

