

Submitted by Regina Huerter December 1, 2000

The Culture of Columbine

SCOPE OF WORK:

On October 6th I was asked to conduct some interviews of past and present students of Columbine High School for the Governor's Columbine Commission regarding the school culture. Within the first week of this assignment, I was also asked to include adults who wished to talk, but, as with the students, maintain their anonymity. It is important to acknowledge that I conducted these interviews as interviews and not as an official investigation. This report is a summary of the information given to me. Whenever possible I have tried to include information that I could verify. There are obvious limitations to this process. I had to rely, in large part, on the students and adults contacting me and being willing to speak with me. The individuals I spoke with are not a scientific sampling, nor necessarily a representation of all points of view. However, I do believe, in spite of these limitations, I received input from a broad cross-section of adults and students. Based upon my interviews, I feel comfortable in making the following report as representative of the culture of Columbine High School.

Between October 14th and November 29th, a total of 34 interviews occurred with a total of 43 interviewees. Fourteen interviews were held in person; 20 were held over the phone. A total of 28 adults and 15 current or past students were interviewed. Approximately fifty-two hours of interview were conducted. The time frame was established in order to provide a time-limited process which was necessary for the Commission to move forward in its efforts.

In this report I have tried to maintain the confidentiality of those I spoke with. The focus of my interviews was not specific to any one incident, person(s) or issue. My interviews were not about Eric Harris or Dylan Klebold per se. The interviews were about students', faculty members' and parents' perceptions and experiences with Columbine High School and its culture. The culture of the school, including bullying behavior and how it was responded to, was the major focus. In addition to interviews, I also undertook the following research: I conducted a search of articles on the Internet; I researched the Constitution of the Colorado High School Activities Association for information on eligibility to play sports; I read the Jefferson County Public School Conduct Code and Related Policies: A Guide For Parents and Students, Fall 2000 edition. (It is my understanding that this was revised for the 2000 school year); and I called and spoke with South Jeffco Sports Association. All Court-related information was verified through ICON, BLACKSTONE or the Jefferson County Sheriff Department.

Due to the broad cross section of people interviewed, this report may seem to be somewhat middle of the road. This does not negate the experiences and perceptions of those who felt the culture was not supportive or positive.

Unless otherwise noted, the information presented is based on people's memory, experiences and perceptions and not necessarily on a factual account or full information. Wherever possible, I have tried to verify or present both sides of the information.

Is there evidence of bullying behavior?

According to the interviews conducted the answer is yes. However the degree of which bullying was taking place is unclear. Two adult interviewees reported that there were no problems with

bullying. However, as one would suspect, they weren't able to give any specifics, as they never experienced anything negative with their children at Columbine. All students with whom I spoke, independent of their status at school, acknowledged there was bullying.

1) Perhaps most telling about why there are different perceptions of the bullying problem at Columbine is the interview of the family who has had two students attending Columbine. One student experienced very traumatic behaviors including bullying and ethnic intimidation, while the other sibling has had an extremely positive school experience that did not involve bullying. As the family stated, "if we hadn't had our experience with one child, we would believe this was a great school for our children to attend."

2) One who admitted to being a bully stated that name calling occurred, and admitted to involvement in one assault, but he would not admit to other activities such as shoving, pushing people into lockers, cutting in line, blocking hallways (several people linking arms), and throwing bottles and other items. All of those who reported being the victim of bullying identified the behaviors listed above. Many people stated that they believed "white hats" were worn by "jocks", those bullying others. Some disagreed with this being used as a symbol. There was clear distinction made by several people that there were "jocks" who were involved in bullying, and there were "athletes" who were not.

3) There were several accounts of physical "assaults" involving shoving, pushing and throwing items. Other assaults of a more serious nature were also reported. Those involved being "thrown" or "slammed" against lockers and walls and body "twisters" (a form of pinching and twisting the skin). Other forms of bullying included cutting in line, and a variety of verbal insults. The verbal assaults were the most common and involved the use of derogatory terms (ie faggot).

4) Of those I spoke with, only a few physical assaults were reported to Administration. In at least one case, the report resulted in an arrest of at least one student, and a 3- (or 5-) day suspension depending on who was recalling the event. The perpetrator was a football player who was said to have been suspended from two games the next football season. I was not able to verify this information. The vast majority of physical assaults related to me went unreported.

5) The term "Trench Coat Mafia" has been used to identify a group who wore "trench coats" and, depending on whom you asked, or what articles you read, were involved in a variety of behaviors, some negative and some positive. According to those I interviewed, they described "trench coat" as a group of friends, some of whom were given trench coats for Christmas, started wearing them, and then were labeled "mafia" by some of the "jocks". (There are several other versions of how the name was created). I spoke with some of those who were involved as Trench Coat Mafia. They talked about not being picked on as a group, but about individuals being picked on when they were separated. Specifically, females remembered being called "sluts" and "nazi lesbians" by jocks. Other times there were accounts of members being shoved, thrown into walls, pushed and on at least one occasion having a bag of ice water thrown onto a Trench Coat Mafia member by a table of "jocks." On this particular occasion the jocks and the Trench Coat Mafia were in the cafeteria, the bag was thrown, words were exchanged, and both groups got up to go outside and fight. "Sid," a security personnel, intervened and escorted those

in the "Trench Coat Mafia" to administration. The "Trench Coat Mafia" members were suspended for 3 days while none of the "jocks" were taken to administration nor received any apparent disciplinary action. Members of TCM admit to responding to insults with returned insults. One interviewee stated that she tried to not make eye contact with the jocks--hoping they would leave her alone and let her pass without any hassle. She said she was "scared to death of them."

TCM members acknowledged Dylan and Eric were friends of many TCM members but not actual members themselves. However, they acknowledged that Eric and Dylan were often recipients of torment by the "jocks."

6) There were repeated allegations of steroid use by "jocks" including a nickname of "steroid poster boy" used to describe one particular person. No one I spoke with admitted to using steroids; however, some close to the "jocks" acknowledged their use. In addition, there were stories of orders being taken for alcohol during school with the alcohol available in a car in the parking lot. There was alleged use and sale of cocaine, pot and ephedrine. Ephedrine was said to have been used by some "jocks" before games and before fights. One interviewee described the "jocks" "fighting clothes" as Khaki pants and a gray ribbed shirt. One interviewee discussed a "jock" getting caught for using pot resulting in his suspension. He was caught again, and to their knowledge was only suspended again where, according to the Conduct Code book, he should have been expelled.

7) Eight interviewees identified drugs and alcohol as problems at the school. Alcohol use was the most widespread, followed by marijuana. Members of all different types of cliques were identified as using alcohol. Some stated, "even those you think are totally straight, like the brains, are drinking." In addition to pot and alcohol, ADAM, heroin, and cocaine were identified. It is impossible to say, from the limited number of interviews I conducted, how widespread the use of steroids or ephedrine were by "jocks" at Columbine. However, from these interviews there appears to be widespread belief that some limited number of "jocks" ingested steroids and/or ephedrine. The reason this is mentioned at all is that it contributed to, at the very least, perceptions of why "jocks" were bullies.

8) One identified the unwritten rules of survival in the school as: "don't screw with anyone who can beat you up, don't look at jocks in the eye, bump them or hit on their girlfriend and don't walk in the wrong area, especially the math hall."

Who was aware of bullying behavior?

Overwhelmingly, the sense was that teachers only responded to what they saw, or wanted to see. If they didn't witness verbal or physical abuse, nothing was done. One question that cannot be answered here is how much was seen but overlooked. There were reports that at times, and when certain parties were involved, teachers overlooked incidents they witnessed.

It is important to note here that we are again dealing with perceptions that no action was taken by administration. It is a real possibility that, in some instances, action was taken, but students and parents were unaware of it. It is however, a situation where the adage, "perception becomes reality," holds true.

9) In one particular, well-documented case, it was reported that Mr. DeAngelis was notified of threats and harassment a female student was undergoing. This harassment took place over a 6 month period of time during which the family tried to work with the male student's family and the school. Over time the male's behavior, as is often the case in domestic violence, became increasingly intense until the relationship was broken off, at least from the perspective of the female. The male involved didn't want to let go and continued to pursue her. Prom was around the corner, the male invited the female, and she declined. Several of the coaches inquired of the young lady if she was going to go with him. At one point, the male student went to the graduate center where she was working, grabbed her arm and confronted her. He had been warned several times prior to this to stay out of the graduate center when she was working. A counselor saw this and laughed, until the female convinced him she wasn't playing. The counselor intervened and sent the male out of the center. The conflict continued to escalate and ultimately the female obtained a restraining order.

The female's parents reported keeping Mr. DeAngelis apprised of the situation, including the fact there was a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO). The day after the restraining order was issued, it was violated. The school said they weren't sure they could honor the TRO. It was suggested that the administration could have her followed around school. That wasn't satisfactory so it was decided that she would stay home for the rest of the year without penalty to her grades. This took place on May 6, 1999. Timing may have played a large part in the administration's decisions; this was the first week Columbine students were going back to school after the shooting. The problem was heightened because the male involved was allowed to remain in school, and he reportedly said disparaging things about the female student like she was sleeping around and that she was a slut.

10) The issues in the above-mentioned case continued into the next year. A shop teacher told a student, in front of the victim's brother that the "whole thing was bull @#%\$." It should be noted that the females' mother was told by another parent that Columbine staff members were talking about her daughter being passed around the football team. The young male in question went on to play football at a university. The president, when challenged about having this young man playing on scholarship for that university, stated in a letter that his staff had received strong endorsements from Columbine staff about this young man. The University President's letter also stated that he was told from staff at Columbine that the young man "had never been charged with any wrongdoing, that the allegations against him were never substantiated and, while there was briefly an ex parte restraining order filed against him, it was dropped for lack of evidence to support it."

11) In another case two years prior to the shooting, a 15-year-old was being bullied by two students. This had been ongoing for a period of weeks (approximately 6 weeks) before it became physical. At one point during this time, the bullies took and destroyed the young man's hat. This was reported to school officials and those involved were made to replace the hat. Physically, while in PE class, the victim was repeatedly subjected to "twisters" a form of pinching and twisting the skin. Although the class was in session, the teacher didn't acknowledge knowing what was taking place. Another form of bullying against this student, a practicing Jew, involved racial slurs and ethnic intimidation, including threatening by the bullies to "build an oven and set him on fire." Each time a basket was made during P.E. Basketball, the

bullies would state "that's another Jew in the oven." They also wrote a song to torment the victim. The victim eventually told his father who immediately called his son's school counselor. The school brought the bullies in, and confronted them. After the students admitted their involvement, the police were called and the juveniles were arrested. Unfortunately this did not end the torment. For the next one and a half years, the issues continued. The father reports that both he and his son continued to call Mr. DeAngelis and the counselor. The counselor would bring the bully in to question him, the bully would deny the behavior, and they would let it go, telling the family "we're doing everything we can." The victim states that "they (administration)" did everything but call me a liar." Finally, the victim told his parents he wanted out of school. At that point, the dad called the school board and that night remembers getting a call from Assistant Principal Pat Patrick. the next morning a meeting was held with Dad, his son, the AP, Principal and the bully. During this meeting they talked and resolved the issue. The solution given by Mr. DeAngelis was to have the two boys stay away from each other. Dad disagreed. He wanted the two to acknowledge each other and say hello as if they meant it. This was decided on. There were no further issues.

12) During one football game a player didn't ride with the team, instead relying on his parents to bring him. The player had been released from jail and missed the bus. When he arrived at the stadium, the coach told him to tell everyone why he was late. He was told he couldn't play the first half of the game. However, he was sent in during the second quarter. One player didn't have all his gear, missing his mouthpiece and without it he couldn't play. Instead of having the latecomer give up his mouthpiece, another player was asked to do so making him ineligible to play but still allowing for the latecomer to enter the game. Team rules, set by the individual coach, provide for issues of transportation, conduct, etc. Without going into more detail, the entire incident left people believing that favoritism existed where some "jocks" are concerned, and that no consequences flowed from their bad behavior.

13) In another incident, a female student reported wanting to say something to a girl friend of a well known "jock". The student called out the girl's name, but the boyfriend confronted her, saying "if you need to say something-talk to me." The "jock" cornered her against the stairs by the school store, and he continued to yell, cuss and call her names with his fists clenched. One male friend tried to help. The male was physically thrown off by the "jock." Finally two other students ("jocks") came by and got him off. The young woman who reported this story remembers two teachers who were at least present and who did nothing.

14) Another student, a female, reported talking to Dylan Klebold her freshman year (1997-98). After their conversation was over, one of the notorious bullies slammed her against the lockers and called her a "fag lover." Many students were in the area but no adults. She did not report this to the administration. When I asked her why, she said that everyone told her "it wouldn't do any good because they wouldn't do anything about it." she went on to explain about this particular bully's demeanor in the hall. She said he wouldn't move and if you didn't, he would shove you.

15) Seven of those I interviewed knew Dylan and Eric. Everyone described them as loners and often the brunt of ridicule and bullying. Although no one had specifics about when and the

degree of bullying they received, most often it was about shoving, pushing, and name calling, especially "faggot." It was also noted by several people interviewed that Eric and Dylan (especially Eric) were "no angels." They were often identified as rude and mean.

How was bullying behavior handled by school administration?

1) A son reported to his father what he felt was extreme rough play in a PE class. The class was filled with a group of soccer players, who, according to the student, were ganging up on him. The son told his parents he didn't want to go back to school. After hearing this, Dad called the school and had a meeting with Coach Place (Dean of Students at the time), Brad Butts (counselor), and Peter Horvath. Pete Horvath (teacher of the class and also the soccer coach) said he would talk to the players and make sure it wouldn't happen again. From the parent's and student's perspective, nothing changed. They didn't hear back from Mr. Butts or anyone else.

2) Parents reported an incident where two weeks into the 1997-98 school year, their son, a senior, came home and said, "Dad, I'm not going back." He reported 4 or 5 football players shoving and pushing him, harassing him verbally and following him to his car. He was scared. Dad placed calls to Andy Lowry, Brad Butts, and Frank DeAngelis but no one answered their phone. Dad left messages for each person. The family didn't receive a call back until the end of October, about six weeks later, from Mr. Lowry. Dad was out of town at the time so Mom took the call. Mom reports that Mr. Lowry was very short and rude on the phone. The family immediately pulled their son out of Columbine and enrolled him in Heritage, where he did well. The son reports that, to this day, he won't cross over Pierce Street.

Regarding the above situation, Dad also wrote a letter to Superintendent of Schools, Jane Hammond, in January 1998, telling her of his son's situation. He received no call back but did get a letter from the South District Area Superintendent who said they "needed to take care of this issue at the building level." Dad called to follow-up but was never allowed to talk with Jane Hammond, even on the phone.

3) A former student, who had been suspended from school after he had intimidated and assaulted a juvenile at school was allowed to complete 40 hours of his community service at the school with the wrestling team. One of those interviewed said they had questioned Mr. DeAngelis about this, but he denied knowing this former student was back in the building.

4) Another father reported during his son's junior year (1997) his son was being picked on. Dad called Mr. De Angelis who the next day convened a meeting with the juniors and seniors and told them that rude behavior wasn't going to happen here-and that was the end of it.

5) Also, as it related to perceptions of favoritism for "jocks," and how it relates to a perception of less accountability for "jocks," is a side issue regarding student parking. It was reported to me and found in several newspaper articles (6/12/1999 Washington Post and others) that one student had special parking privileges allowing him to park his car, a Hummer, in special areas. the stories varied from a) all day in a fifteen minute parking space. b) a handicap parking space in the teachers' parking lot. C) or in a yellow striped area closest to a school entrance. I don't

know exactly where the vehicle was parked, but it is clear that this has contributed to the perception of differential treatment for some students, in this case a "jock." In checking this out with the school, they insist it is the size of the vehicle that dictates the parking spot. Safety and not blocking the flow of traffic are at the center of the rationale. While visiting the school, I observed several other large trucks parked in a variety of spaces that I believe would also work for this car. It may be of interest that the younger sibling of the student in question currently has his Hummer in the same spot. As a side note, it was reported to me that another student was given a ticket for not having a parking permit in his father's car when he had driven it to school. He had forgotten to put the permit in his father's car. Although he explained the situation, he was made to pay the ticket for parking without a permit.

What perceptions were held?

In this section I have identified perceptions and/or experiences reported to me that I believe lead to perceptions of favoritism for athletes. Included is any information I have to support or challenge them. As noted, some of the information presented is based on my personal experiences.

- 1) There is one perception that Columbine is run by "jocks," and if you weren't a "jock you didn't fit." After spending several hours at Columbine I'm not sure I would agree. I base this on several observations. Because Columbine has had a winning football season I expected to find an abundance of "go football" posters. This wasn't the case. In fact, if anything the school was bare except for the commons area where a few banners were hung. I thought maybe this was because the school was trying to downplay the "jock" image. After talking with several people, I found this was not the case. In fact posters are limited and pep rallies or assemblies are only held if the team wins. I had heard that the winning forensics team, band and theater were not put in the spotlight. While I believe there is a strong emphasis on sports, after reading three editions of "Rebline" the school's bulletin, all types of successes were noted. I only read editions written in 2000, so I don't know how they were written in the past.
- 2) In spring of 1998, Coach Lowry called a meeting of the football team. He said he had received a letter from the district - they weren't bringing enough people to the games to use the larger Jeffco stadium - so they were going to have to use Trail Blazer stadium. Coach Lowry stated that he wanted all team members to treat everyone with respect in order to increase attendance. It was reported that several students had gone to Lowry questioning why they should attend the games when members of the football team were harassing students.
- 3) There was a strong perception from nearly everyone I spoke with that there was "no reason to say anything about the bullying--no one was going to do anything. Some students were just "untouchable." The problem this presents is that it perpetuates bullying. If a school administration is unaware of bullying, then it cannot address it. If it doesn't address it, it will continue and perhaps even worsen.
- 4) Several students reported a lack of visibility of Administration in the halls. It is my understanding that each administrator, including the Principal have a set day to be in the halls where they are responsible for the 15 or so teachers who also have "hall duty". It is my

understanding this rotation has been in place for several years.

5) Several people noted that Deans, Assistant Principals and Principals were often, if not always, coaches, or had a coaching background. This feeds a further perception that athletes are given preferential treatment by those deans or AP's.

6) Dakota Ridge, Heritage and Jeffco Open School were noted by six interviewees as being very good schools. (Several parents had children attending more than one school). In general, interviewees viewed the school environments at those schools as welcoming, warm, friendly and diverse. It was noted that Dakota Ridge promoted all extra-curricular activities at "back to school night," visibly displaying art, music (band) and sport-related trophies. Jeffco Open School was seen as fostering critical thinking skills, independent thinkers and a place everyone fits. A broad array of interviewees described Columbine as sterile, impersonal, stuffy, institutional and superficial. One interviewee noted that Columbine students she interacted with during the 1998 school year were the most difficult class she has had when trying to engage them and get them to take risks.

7) One former student, part of the "in crowd" discussed her past and present view of Columbine. While she was a student, she felt the cliques and bullying were just part of being in school. She doesn't believe that now. Two things have changed her mind. First, her younger sister entered Columbine last year and went from a straight "A" student to failing. No one from the school called to let her parents know for several months until finally a physics teacher called. The sister reported being unhappy. They pulled her from Columbine and enrolled her in Dakota Ridge. Her sister is again flourishing. Her sister told her that everyone at Dakota Ridge is friendly no matter which clique they are part of. The other experience this former student has had involves her current job. She supervises teens from a variety of schools. As they talk about their school experiences it has become apparent that bullying is not present in all schools-at least not to the degree she witnessed at Columbine.

8) I was told by adults working in the district that they were afraid to speak up about school issues, including school culture and bullying behavior, because they feared losing their jobs. All said bullying behavior was going on, that they did tell AP's, and nothing was done.

Some faculty interviewed said they were told to not discuss the shooting or Columbine. They were told by school administrators that when there was a bomb scare following the shooting they still had to stay at school. After reporting concerns about particular students' state of mind, faculty reported that they were not taken seriously. Faculty also reported that input from all levels of faculty are not treated the same. When Greg Barnes committed suicide, they were told to not tell the students. They said the communication is not better than before the shooting--just more controlling. The number of faculty interviewed was fairly small. However, their comments related above were very consistent.

9) Parents reported that if they did make a report about a teacher's behavior toward their child they were told that it would be handled. However, the parents received no verification or follow-up. They also stated that teachers and administration have told them that if you don't like the teachers or policies, "you can leave and go to another school."

Conclusions and Recommendations:

In light of the limitations I mentioned above, it is difficult to say with scientific certainty what is reality regarding bullying at Columbine and what is only perceived as being real. Even with respect to perception, it is also difficult to say with certainty how widely held the perceptions are. What is not in doubt is that bullying occurred at Columbine, that in some instances the school administration reacted appropriately, and in other instances the school administration's reaction is unclear or altogether unknown. Among the people I interviewed, the vast majority believed that bullying existed at Columbine and that it was part of the school's "culture." Some interviewees based their perceptions on incidents that involved only one or two "bullies" and others based their perceptions on the involvement of a larger group of individuals, and different levels of harassing behavior over an extended period of time.

Finally, it should be clear that from my perspective nothing in this report that indicates the presence of bullying at Columbine either justifies or explains the behavior of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold on April 20, 1999. The scope of this report was only meant to look at the issue of bullying. I do not draw any conclusions regarding the causal relationship between bullying at Columbine and the outrageous devastation wrought by Harris and Klebold during the Columbine shooting.

Recommendations:

- 1) Schools should develop policies regarding how, what, when and under what circumstances information regarding disciplinary action can be released. This may be in place at Columbine, but I did not find it in the Conduct Code. I believe people, especially victims, have a right to know what has happened in a case, rather than simply hear, "I'll take care of it." The Policy should be part of the District guide given to all parents and students. At the very least there should be protocol regarding follow-up of any situation.
- 2) The State of Colorado should create an academy/training for School Resource Officers or Community Resource Officers. This would provide statewide uniform training for SRO's/CRO's about adolescent development, crisis management, basic platform (teaching) skills, substance abuse, youth subcultures, etc. Law enforcement can be an invaluable asset to a school. However, a poorly trained officer can do more harm than good. I am not saying this because I believe the CRO at Columbine acted inappropriately, but because CRO's are critical to school safety, and proper training will only increase their effectiveness.
- 3) In situations where an individual student is notoriously disruptive, action must be swift and certain. according to the Conduct Code (although some parts pertaining to suspension and expulsion were adopted in 1997 and revised in 2000), a habitually disruptive student is anyone suspended twice in one year or calendar year for causing material and substantial disruption while on school property, at a school sanctioned event.
- 4) Different interviewees, both students and adults, suggested that staff and administration evaluations should be undertaken and input should be sought from parents, students, and other staff members. This could be done on a regular interval with a random sample of students and parents. It is my understanding that there is a survey that is done at least every other, or every three years, called "Make Your Voice Heard" that is completed by students and parents.

Students are the "consumers" at schools, and their impression of how faculty and counselors perform should be sought out.

5) It is of great concern that people who were trying to work within the "sight based management" system felt so helpless. On more than one occasion, parents indicated they turned to the district after repeated tries to resolve issues at the local school building level. Not only was there untimely response, but often no response. Those interviewed only turned to the district after no and/ or inadequate response from the local level. Each time they talked to the North or South District Superintendent, they were told that the Superintendent's office trusts the local building administrator's decisions. I understand there is a formal grievance policy under Public/Concerns and Complaints (pg.62). the policy seems somewhat vague, but implementation seems to be the issue. The policy states there is a 20 working day turn around post conference at the local administration level. If not satisfied, a written request for an appeal can be sent to official designees. The policy does not state that the local building or the district level response has to be in writing. I would guess that currently it does not. Once the district makes a decision it is final.

In speaking to the interviewees it was clear that there was little or no satisfaction in most instances where this policy was or should have been implemented.

6) Perhaps utilizing the Advisory Board of the Safe Communities - Safe School program that Dell Elliott and Attorney General Ken Salazar have formed, create a pilot program that focuses on increasing students trust in reporting negative behavior.

7) Ensure that all Team Rules are in writing and distributed to all students and parents. Copies of all rules should be kept in a notebook in the Athletic Director's Office.

In one assault case that was prosecuted, two years lapsed between the incident and prosecution. The offense occurred on Nov 1, 1996, the arrest on Oct 15, 1997, and the plea on Jan 21, 1998. Personally, I find this inexcusable.

I want to thank and acknowledge all of those who took the time and were willing to speak with me. Many did so with reported fear for their jobs and safety of their children. I also want to thank the commission for allowing these people the opportunity to be heard. They relayed to me that they were grateful for this opportunity.