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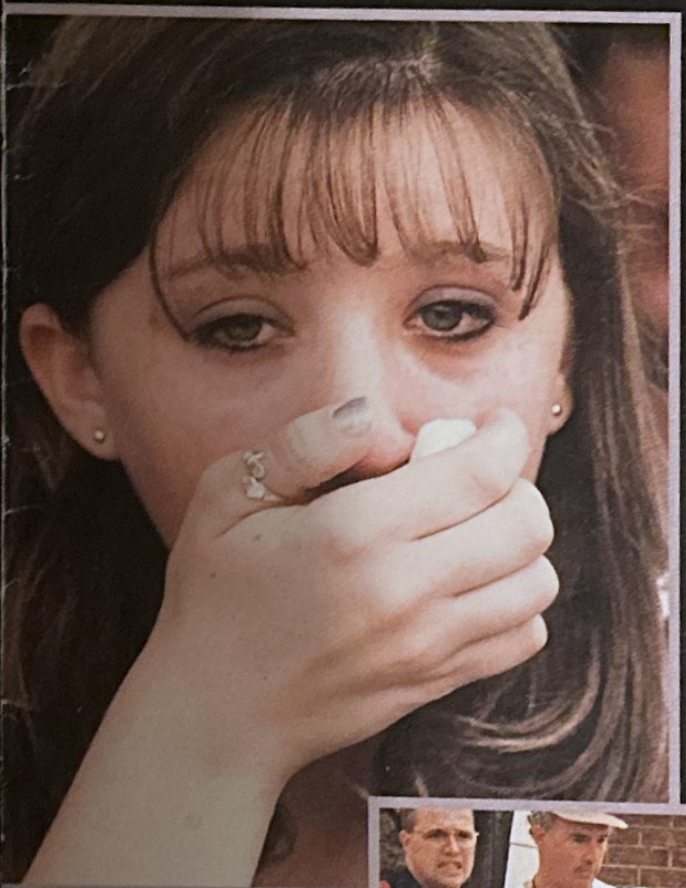
People weekly

The Colorado High School Shootings

'MY GOD, MY GOD!'

Inside accounts from students who were there, and the anguish of the shocked survivors



Clockwise from top left: sophomore Ashley Prinzi waits for a missing friend; Fran Allison (right) comforts her daughter; an emergency team attends to a wounded student

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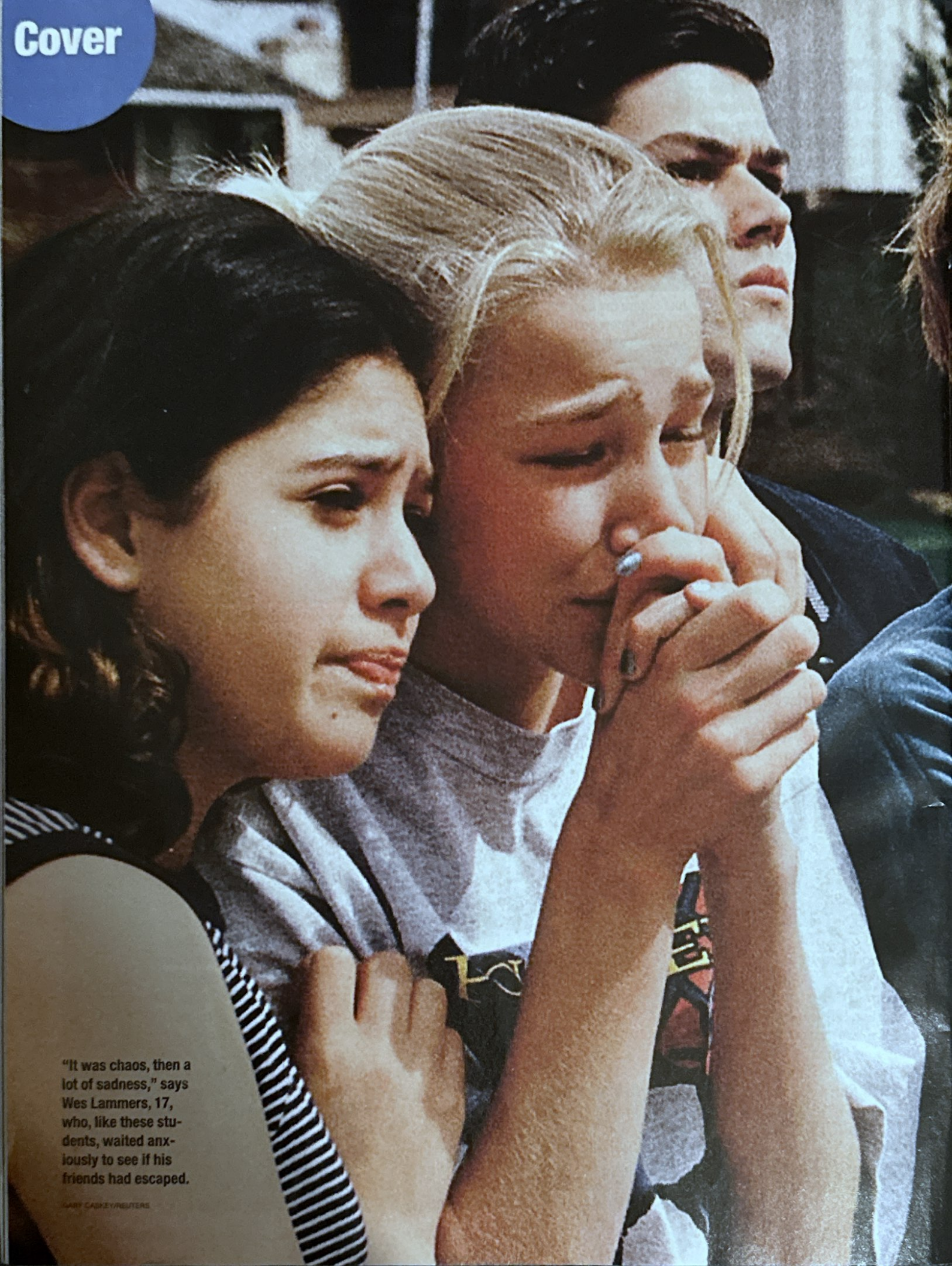


"It was chaos, then a lot of sadness," says Wes Lammers, 17, who, like these students, waited anxiously to see if his friends had escaped.

GARY CASKEY/REUTERS

SORROW and OUTRAGE

A Colorado town endures terror, then tears, in an all too familiar scenario

"I was really scared. This is terrible, but I wanted

The reunions were tearful, the fears intense. "I don't want to go back to school," says Katie Micek, 16. "There's blood everywhere."

After four hours of havoc, teenage gunmen Eric Harris (left) and Dylan Klebold took their own lives, police say.

(LEFT) MEAGHAN STIRLING; (RIGHT) COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL

"It was 11:30, and I was in choir," says Zak Cartaya, 17, a senior at Littleton, Colorado's Columbine High School. "My friend Brandon Reisbeck walked into the classroom and said someone had a gun, that we needed to get out of there. Then you could hear the gunshots downstairs in the commons. Me and my friend Adam Foss were trying to get people the heck out of there. We were pushing them out the door pretty much. We thought we had most of the class out, but I guess we didn't get out as many as we thought we did. We heard more shots, and you could just see a huge fireball. He was firing in the hallway.

"That's when we all got to the ground. There was another huge fireball in the hall. I know that was probably where a lot of kids got shot. So we started getting everybody left—about 60 kids, mostly girls—into the office [at the back of] the choir room. We used this big old filing cabinet to cover the door. Then we got Mr. Andre's desk. Just when we got through with the barricade, the shooters opened fire into the choir room to make sure nobody was hiding. There was no teacher with us, just all these kids in a little room that was so hot.

"We all hid in there, and we all fell apart. Nobody was able to hold on to themselves very well. There was a phone in the office, and I was the first one to make a call. I wasn't in any shape to talk to my mom at that point, so I called my boss, Joey, at New York Bagel to call her and talk to her with a level head and tell her

d. This is terrible, but I wanted people behind me so I wouldn't be the one hit"

As parents clutched their children, the dominant refrain was, "I never thought this would happen here."

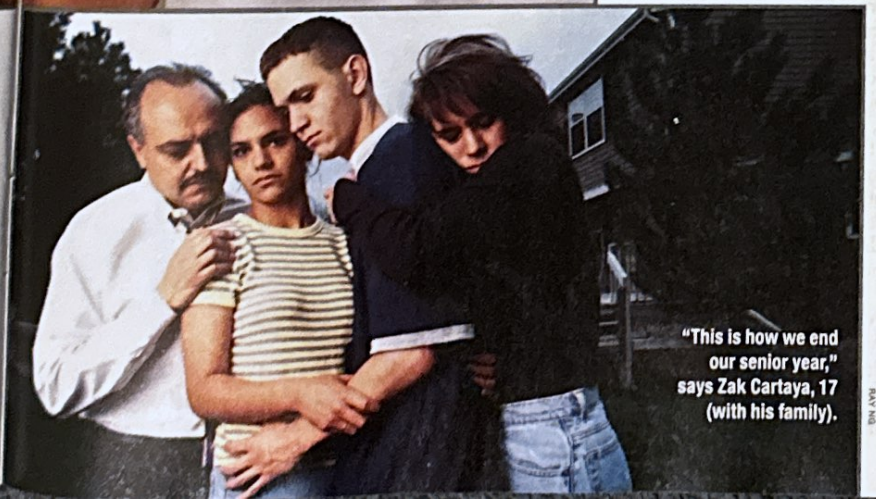
Outside the school, FBI SWAT teams waited to pounce. Inside, says senior Domonic Duran, "it was just like mad panic."

GARY CASKEY/REUTERS

that everything was okay. [A little while later] I called her. We were all lying down on the floor. I just said, 'Mom, I'm okay. I love you.' I had to be sure I told my mom I loved her in case I died."

Once upon a time, the most that kids had to worry about at school was a looming test or a deadline for a paper. No more. After the carnage that left at least 15 dead and more than 20 wounded at Columbine High School in Littleton, an affluent suburb eight miles southwest of Denver, there can be few students anywhere who feel entirely confident that they won't one day encounter a fellow student with a gun in his hand and madness in his eyes. Though the tragedies of West Paducah, Ky., Pearl, Miss., Jonesboro, Ark., and Springfield, Ore., to name just the most well-known recent school shootings, were horrific enough, their tolls fell short of the clockwork slaughter among the 1,900 students at Columbine (which is named after the Colorado state flower). For more than three hours, two misfits spread terror among the students while hundreds of local, state and federal law enforcement officers lay siege outside.

If the motivations of the two killers—identified by authorities as Dylan Klebold, 17, and Eric Harris, 18—were hard to fathom, their troubled personalities had long been evident. They belonged to a loose gang of about a dozen juniors and seniors at Columbine who called themselves the Trenchcoat Mafia. Their



"This is how we end our senior year," says Zak Cartaya, 17 (with his family).

RAY DIN

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"I thought it was a senior prank—you know,

"Everyone's just in shock and embracing each other," said County Commissioner Rick Sheehan.

In the end most students made it safely to the waiting buses. Among the last 35 to leave the school building was Amy Terry, 16, who says, her voice cracking, "I can't forget the bodies."

uniform consisted of camouflage pants tucked into their combat boots. Students reported seeing some members wearing shirts adorned with swastikas. (Perhaps not coincidentally, the rampage took place on April 20, Hitler's birthday.) There were reports that a few group members had a fascination with death. "They seemed misunderstood," says Justin Kehm, 18, a senior who had played school soccer with both boys. "They always kept to themselves. The other kids would make fun of them."

Klebold, Harris and the rest of their group may have felt particularly out of place at Columbine, an unabashedly rah-rah high school that prides itself on having one of the top sports programs in the state. "Those guys resented the white hats, the jocks," says junior Wes Lammers, 17, who explains that the school's athletes often wore white baseball caps with names of various pro teams emblazoned on them. "The jocks would also make fun of these guys, tease them and all." And indeed, several survivors suggested that the killers had targeted athletes, as well as some minority students, during their spree.

There was reason to believe that the two killers had been plotting their assault for some time. Domonic Duran, 18, a senior at Columbine, recalls a paper that Harris had recently shared with his creative writing class. "It was like a war . . . and he and his brother were in it,"

"It was like a dream," says Dusty Hoffschneider, 17. "You didn't think it was happening." But the wounds—and deaths—were real.

firecrackers. Then our teacher yelled, 'Everybody out!' "

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Previous schoolyard rampages show some eerie similarities

Tragically, murder at a public school is hardly new. On a cold February morning in 1996, Barry Loukaitis, a ninth grader whom classmates teased, dressed up in black from head to toe and went to school with a .30-30 deer rifle to get even. When the shooting at Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Wash., finally stopped, two students and a teacher lay dead. Since then, the unimaginable horror of school murders has become unimaginably familiar, as the grim roll call goes on: Pearl, Miss. (two dead), Jonesboro, Ark. (five dead), Springfield, Ore. (two dead), and now Littleton.

If Americans know all too well the phenomenon of kids killing kids, its genesis remains beyond our understanding. In recent months, PEOPLE has talked to those at the center of the maelstrom—the killers' parents, the killers' surviving victims and even a killer himself—in search of clues to their motivation.

Currently serving a life sentence at a Mississippi penitentiary for the Oct. 1, 1997, murder of his mother, a girlfriend who had spurned him and another student at Pearl High School, Luke Woodham, then 16, maintains that "no one, especially children, just becomes a murderer. Something had to happen to push them to that point." Before becoming what he calls "a satanic assassin," Woodham says he felt unloved by his single mother (his father had left the family years earlier) and despised by the other kids at school. "I was just a nerd," he wrote from prison in response to questions from PEOPLE. "They just picked on me all of the time." On the day of the shootings, Woodham's mom had refused to drive him to a friend's house. "I was just really p---ed," he told investigators.

Mitchell Johnson, 14, and Andrew Golden, 12, fatally shot four girls and a teacher at a Jonesboro, Ark., middle school on March 24, 1998. Although he never suspected he had raised a killer, Scott Johnson, 37, admits he "saw signs of trouble" when Mitchell visited him in Minnesota in 1996. "More aggressive behavior, more talking back," says Johnson, who was divorced from Mitchell's mother in 1994. "He was always pushing the limits."

In 1997, Mitchell allegedly sexually fondled a young girl; he had himself once been molested by an older boy—a fact that he didn't reveal to anyone until after his arrest. Despite the red flags, Mitchell saw a therapist only once. "Counseling for what?" asks his mother, homemaker Gretchen Woodard, 43. "This is a little boy who played football and basketball. He loved school. He wasn't on drugs." Woodard says she will never understand why he resorted to murder: "You can beat yourself up asking why, but you'll never know."

Yet even if the whys are undiscoverable, the whens may not be. Time and again, it seems that if attention had been paid to warning signs, disasters could have been averted. Springfield, Ore., shooter Kip Kinkel, then 15, told a class that he dreamed of being a killer before he gunned down his parents and two teenagers last year; Barry Loukaitis wrote poetry about killing with the "ruthlessness of a machine" weeks before he did just that. "When do you take it seriously?" asks former Frontier Junior High School phys ed teacher Jon Lane, 51. His answer: "Each and every time."

Woodham blames his parents, society and media violence for his misdeeds.

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

- Patrick Rogers
- Bob Stewart in Pearl, Kate Klise in Jonesboro and Michael Haederle in Moses Lake

"Kids were all holding hands praying"

GARY CASKEY/REUTERS

Josh Swans leaps to greet his brother Andrew after spotting him on one of the buses evacuating students from Columbine.

says Duran. "They were describing shooting the enemy and throwing grenades. It was really descriptive. It sounded like he was experiencing it in his mind when he wrote it." The two gunmen, found dead by police amid the carnage in the library, had apparently wired their own bodies with explosives before committing suicide—in an apparent effort to continue the killing even after their own demise. Bombs and booby traps prevented authorities from identifying and removing the duo's victims for many hours.

Some students escaped harm through the most miraculous luck. Brooks Brown, a senior, had been at odds with Harris in the past. "He had told me he was going to kill me," said Brown. "He threatened my friends." But when Brown bumped into Harris as the spree was getting under way, his onetime nemesis unaccountably let him off, saying, "Brooks, I like you now, go home." In another strange incident, one of the killers pointed a gun at junior Bree Pasquale's head—and left her unharmed. "You could hear them laughing as they ran down the hallways shooting people," she told *The Denver Post*. "He put a gun in my face and said, 'I'm doing this because people made fun of me last year.'"

While some students called the police—and even reporters—using their cell phones, sophomore Billy Hanifen took refuge under a table in the cafeteria with a female friend. "They were throwing [pipe bombs] around us and shooting shotguns. I was holding on to my friend because she was going crazy," he says. "She was crying, and she said she felt a couple of empty shotgun shells hit her" as they were ejected from a weapon scarcely an arm's length away. "I was so afraid they would shoot us, and I don't know why they didn't. It was impossible for them not to see us, because he was standing over us."

In some cases, survival stemmed from sheer coolness under fire. Chris Mosier, 38, an earth sciences teacher, herded roughly 50 kids into his classroom and ordered them to lie flat on the floor. "I turned out the lights and we all hid in the back away from the door," he says. "Then one of the bullets came through the door and went into the wall. I was pretty scared, but I had to hold it together. You have all these 15-year-old eyeballs look-

"There were dead bodies everywhere"

ing up to you for answers and strength. I had a couple of girls who were hyperventilating and I kept telling them to relax and breathe deeply. I told them this was just a great big game of hide-and-seek, and we were going to be the best hiders ever."

Meanwhile, Mosier's wife, Cheryl, 31, also an earth sciences teacher, was holed up in the next classroom with about 25 freshmen. She, too, realized that the lives of the students depended upon keeping silent. "Cheryl kept them quiet by passing around pieces of paper and asking them to write letters to friends," says Mosier. "Anything to keep them writing and busy but something that wouldn't make noise. She said she wanted to write me a letter but she was afraid she would cry, so she just wrote down prayers."

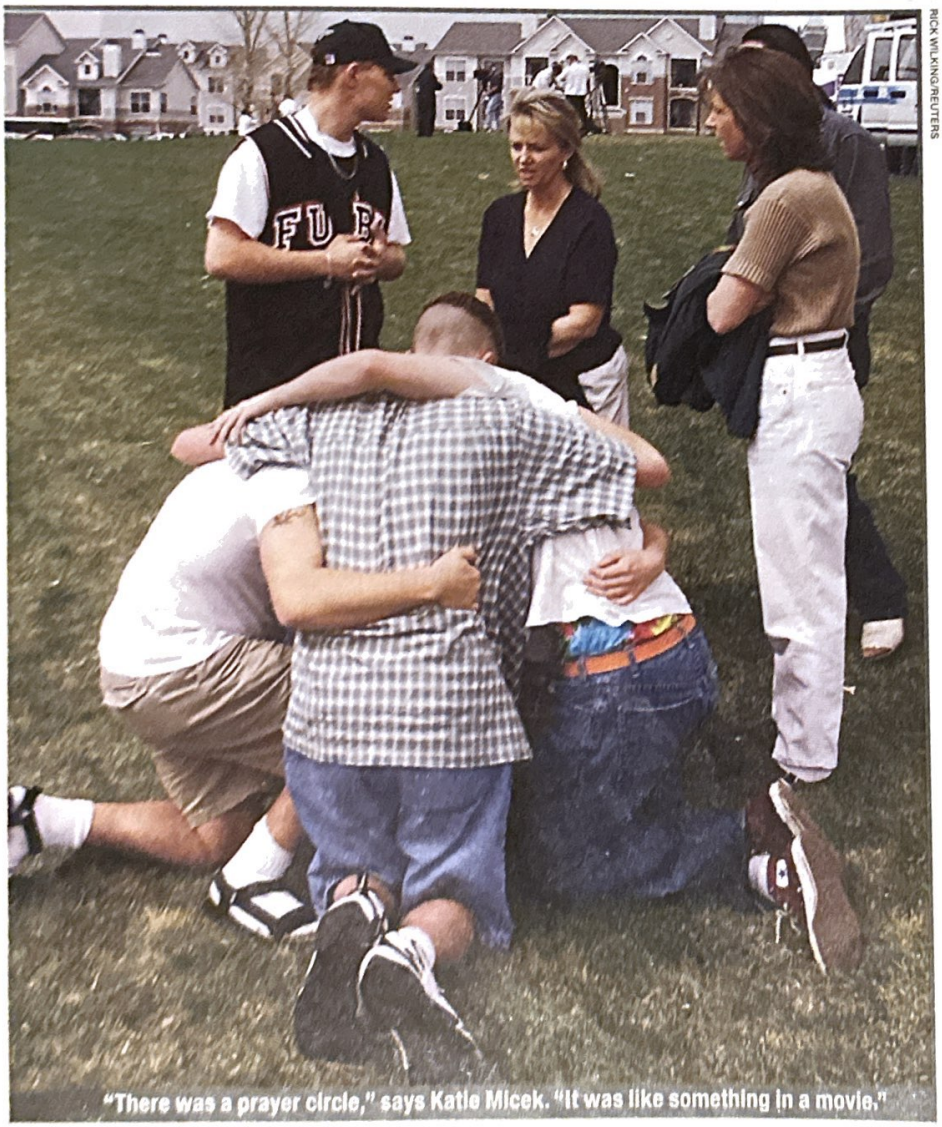
Zak Cartaya and the other students holed up for hours in the office of the choir room were terrified they were about to be discovered. "We couldn't talk; we were afraid they would hear us. You could hear one of the gunmen outside. You could hear shots everywhere. They went on for the whole three hours we were in there. There were more girls than guys in the room. Most of the guys just tore out of the classroom when the shooting started, while the girls stayed and hid under the chairs. There was a lot of prayer in the room, and tears. We were telling people to shut up and be quiet. We couldn't let people cry.

"Then the SWAT team came, at least 30 guys armed to the teeth. We walked through the auditorium, which was flooded with the sprinklers that had been going on. Everything was destroyed—band instruments, everything. We walked out the rear of the auditorium, and as we were leaving there we saw bodies in the commons. I saw like five. They looked like young kids. They came in and took young kids' lives."

In the aftermath of the tragedy at Columbine, it is perhaps worth remembering that, despite the rash of highly publicized school killings in the past two years, the number of Americans under 18 murdered by other juveniles each year has actually declined since 1994. What is increasing, however, is the number of kids being killed with firearms, which has quadrupled in the past 10 years. "There's a sense a lot of people have that the current generation of teenagers is going to hell, that they've lost their moral bearings," says Delbert Elliott, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "But the evidence doesn't suggest that is happening at all. It's not more and more kids [committing murder]; rather those who are doing it now are using guns."

That, of course, is no comfort to the victims and residents in Littleton. The trauma from the incident, the sense that their shattered lives will never feel as secure again, is not likely to fade anytime soon. "I've always been afraid of roller coasters," says sophomore Ellen Prommersberger, 16. "But there's nothing this scary that could ever happen again in my life. Going back to the school. That's what I'm afraid of now."

It is a sentiment echoed by Zak Cartaya. "They took our school from us," he says. "They took everything. We don't have anything left."

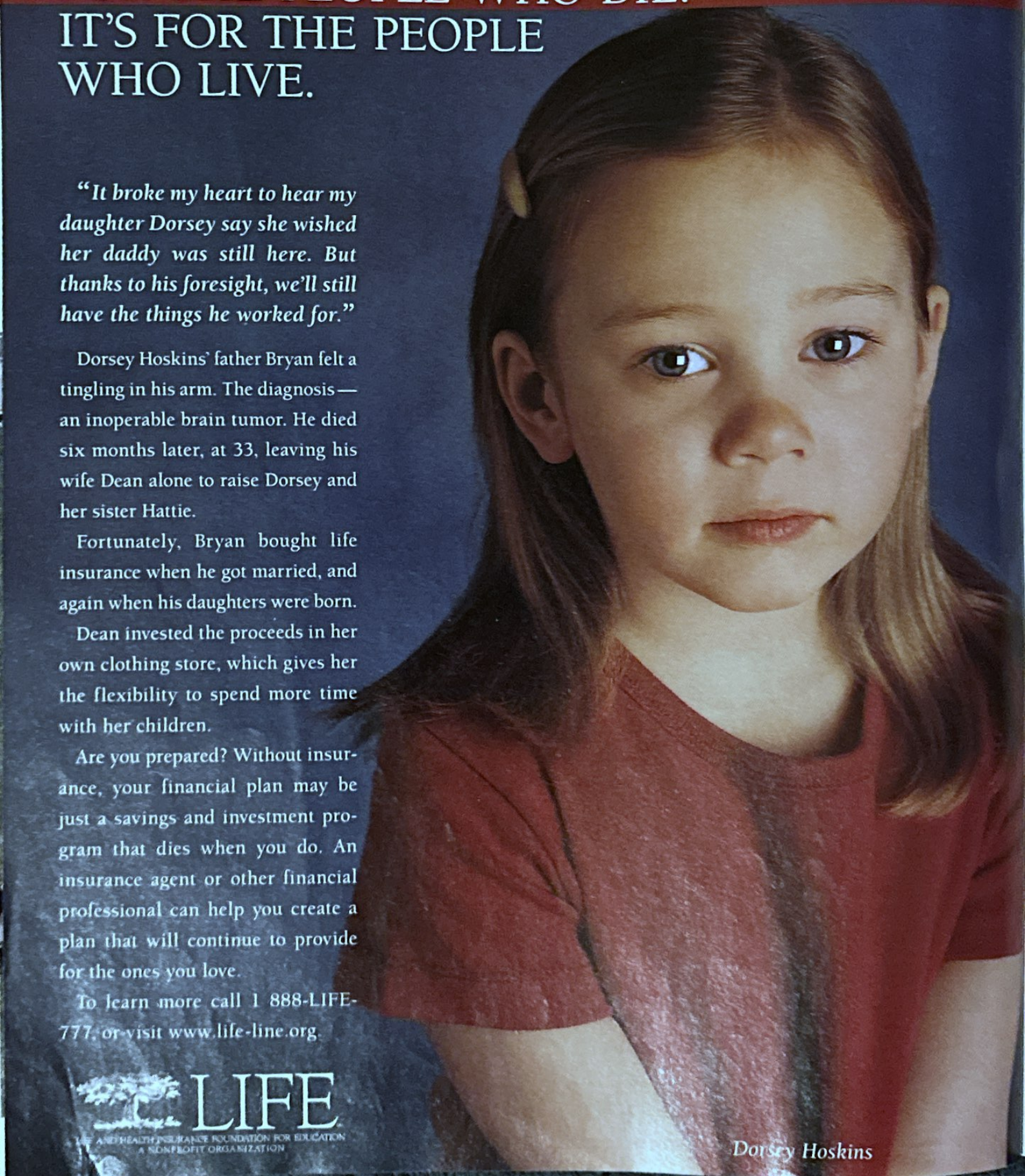


RICK WILKING/REUTERS

"There was a prayer circle," says Katie Micek. "It was like something in a movie."

- Bill Hewitt
- Vickie Bane in Littleton, Ron Arias, Karen Bates, Champ Clark, Tom Cunneff and Lyndon Stambler in Los Angeles and Linda Kramer in Washington, D.C.

LIFE INSURANCE ISN'T FOR THE PEOPLE WHO DIE. IT'S FOR THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE.



"It broke my heart to hear my daughter Dorsey say she wished her daddy was still here. But thanks to his foresight, we'll still have the things he worked for."

Dorsey Hoskins' father Bryan felt a tingling in his arm. The diagnosis—an inoperable brain tumor. He died six months later, at 33, leaving his wife Dean alone to raise Dorsey and her sister Hattie.

Fortunately, Bryan bought life insurance when he got married, and again when his daughters were born.

Dean invested the proceeds in her own clothing store, which gives her the flexibility to spend more time with her children.

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