

7 Realities Of Surviving Mass Shootings The Media Leaves Out

By Mark Hill

Amanda was a 15-year-old student at Columbine High School when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered 12 students and a teacher there. And since saying that America still struggles with school shootings is a championship-level understatement, we wanted to get her perspective on what happened then, and what's happened since.

#7. You're Living A Normal Day, And Then You're In The Middle Of A Shooting

Columbine High is home to around 1,700 students, and Amanda was one of the 56 people in the library when it was attacked. She wasn't a target; she didn't even know the shooters. She was merely hanging out. "I hadn't eaten breakfast, so I [bought] some donuts from the vending machine. So I didn't have any money for lunch, otherwise I would have been in the cafeteria." The shooting started outside, and Amanda and the others heard it. But because they were in a real-life high school and not an action movie, they had no idea *what* they were hearing. "I was thinking it sounded like firecrackers, and that it was just a weird sound to hear at that time of day. A few kids stood up and looked out the window, but they didn't see anything."

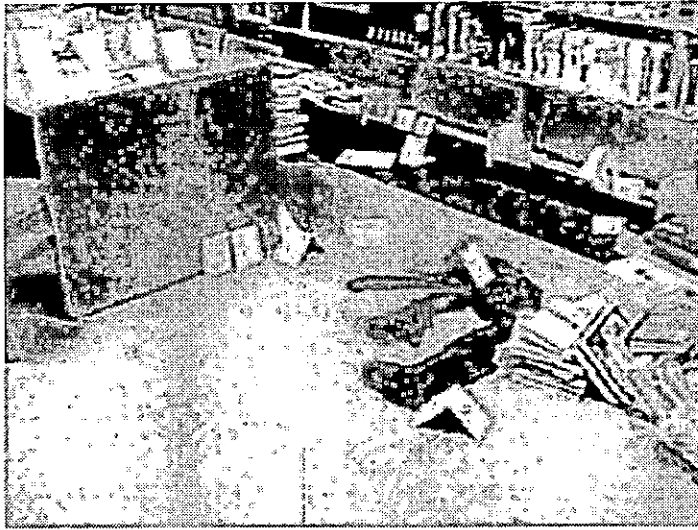


Via YouTube

... Yet.

It's not like school shootings were unheard of before Columbine -- there had been two the year before. But the nice thing about modern civilization is that we don't and shouldn't have to assume that every weird noise is made by a fellow human trying to kill us.

"A moment later, [a teacher] ran in. She was completely frantic. Everyone just kind of looked at her like she was part of some elaborate prank. But she kept insisting, 'Get under the tables, get under the tables,' and all of a sudden it clicked and everyone scrambled."



Via Crimeandcolumbine.tumblr.com

"Get out of the library" might have been better advice, but there was no way of knowing at the time.

The fact that Amanda was still alive to talk to us mostly came down to luck and a good choice of table.

"I got under my table, and part of me was still thinking it was some kind of joke, because I couldn't believe it. Then I'm thinking, 'OK, this table is visible from two sides, so I better move.' There was this long table directly across from me that had cubbies underneath, so you could only see them from one side. So I crawled in next to this other girl, pulled a chair in front of me, huddled under there. And then I heard more popping noises, but coming from inside the school. [Then] I heard two very angry voices, they came straight to the back of the library, about 10 feet from me. One yelled 'Everybody get up right now or we're going to blow your [fucking] heads off.' No one got up, so they started shooting."

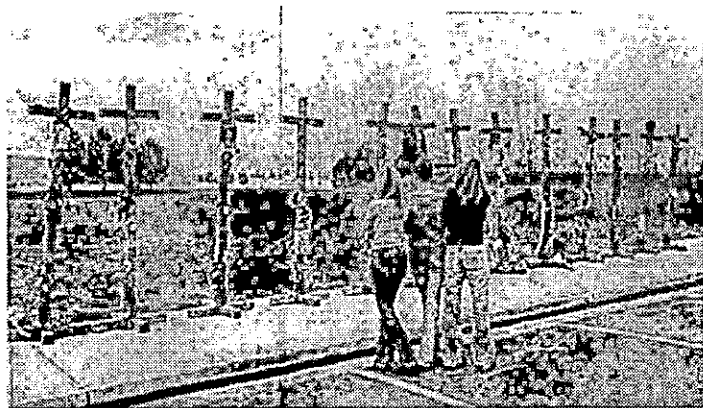


Via Wikipedia

It was pretty clear that standing up wasn't going to get you sent on your way with a friendly wave.

Harris and Klebold spent seven minutes in the library, killing 10 people and injuring 12 more, including shooting the girl next to Amanda in the shoulder. After they left, Amanda and most of the survivors evacuated and met the police outside. The police hadn't entered the building, having been trained to contain the area and wait for a specially prepared SWAT team -- an approach that was never used again after Columbine. Harris and Klebold returned to the library half an hour later and killed themselves. And because the human brain is weird even at the best of times, Amanda's thought process wasn't quite what you'd expect.

"After [the girl next to me was shot], I'm sitting there thinking 'I'm not going to get a chance to go to [an anime convention],' which I had just learned about! That was a weird thing to pop into my head at such a horrible moment."



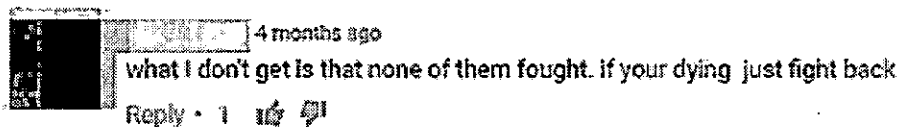
Michael Smith / Getty Images

Luckily, it wasn't her last thought. That's a rough one to explain to St. Peter.

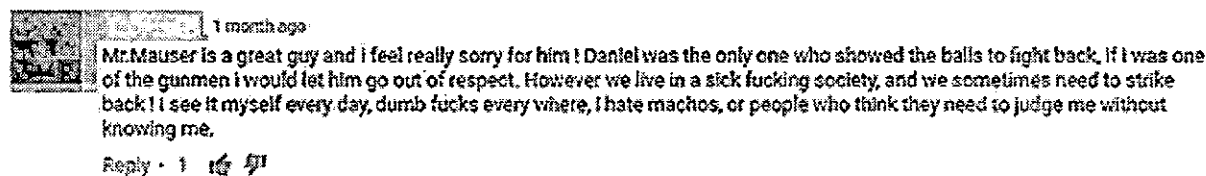
#6. You React To Life-Or-Death Scenarios In Strange Ways

Speaking of anime and not being aware that somebody is about to try to murder you: "Because of [family issues], I had been cutting class now and then. Before I headed off that morning, I actually thought about ditching again, but I had a test I needed to take and I was just in a good mood, singing anime songs, thinking I'll get through my test and my day."

We mention that because after every shooting, there are always people who talk about how the victims should have fashioned crude sets of armor out of textbooks, stormed the gunman, and saved the day. That's what they would have done if God had the balls to put them in that situation instead, after all. But every conversation about how people *should* have reacted forgets that they're, you know, normal *people*, not Bruce Willises (Willii?).



YouTube



YouTube

Good idea. Make this tragedy about how great *you* are.

"I hate people like that. People always say, 'Oh, I would have jumped the shooter and smacked the gun out of their hand,' but you never know how you're going to react until you're actually in that situation. I had thought that I would be the one to cry and scream. I didn't, I just went completely numb. You only have the privilege of saying that because you haven't been in a situation like that, so don't even pretend that you're going to be a hero. You probably would have pissed your pants. I was just being a regular dorky 15-year-old."

As common as shootings seem, they were rare enough that one assumed "wacky shenanigans" before "mass murder."

#5. The Aftermath Was Also A Nightmare

It was initially reported that Harris and Klebold had been part of the "Trenchcoat Mafia," a group at the school who, shockingly enough, all wore trench coats. And because Harris and Klebold wore trench coats during the shooting, there was rampant, irresponsible speculation that the "Mafia" was some group of miserable, murderous outcasts, rather than some teenagers with predictably terrible fashion sense. Amanda's brother, Joe, happened to have been one of them.

TERROR IN LITTLETON: THE GROUP; Society of Outcasts Began With a \$99 Black Coat

By JOE WILGOREN APRIL 23, 1999

The New York Times

"It got out that Joe had known Eric and Dylan. So the media started bugging him, wanting interviews. And people would start calling him and harassing him and giving him death threats, thinking he was in on the shooting. 'How dare you let all these kids die, you should have said something!' He didn't know anything -- he hadn't talked with them in six months, he graduated the year before. The police interviewed him, they confiscated his computer for a couple of weeks. When they brought it back, it was completely wiped."

Harris and Klebold weren't part of the group, but even today, you can find people who are convinced that Joe knew something or was somehow involved. If you rush to build a story about a group of edgy outcasts who got pushed too far, people are going to eat it up regardless of whether it's true. It was tough for Amanda to get back to a normal routine with people constantly calling to threaten her brother for dressing like a *Matrix* extra. And one bit of sensationalist reporting during the search for answers inadvertently changed the local fashion scene for well over a decade.

"After the shooting, Joe couldn't [wear his trench coat anymore]. No one could. You didn't see trench coats in public until three years ago."



Species125/iStock

Meaning that for two decades, teen boys have been forced to find an *alternative* way to look dumb.

#4. Trying To Get Back To Normal Is Weird

Two weeks later, Amanda and her classmates began finishing out the year with half-days at a different school. They didn't exactly take the opportunity to pull wacky pranks on their rivals. "We sleepwalked through the classes. No one was really paying attention. In my math class, the teacher said, 'If you do the work, it will count as extra credit. If you don't, that's fine too.' People were numb. Security was really heightened. A lot of kids didn't like that. It made them feel like they were in a prison."

They tried to get back to normalcy, but it was tough. Would *you* be able to focus on algebra if your study partner had recently been shot? Amanda also noted that no one used the new library, in part because they noticed that its tables offered no protection.



Via YouTube

Which really isn't something high schoolers should have to consider when looking for places to pretend to study.

Next year, everyone went back to Columbine. It was an easy decision. "I didn't want Eric and Dylan to take my school away. It wasn't even a question. A lot of kids had the same attitude. They didn't want to lose their school over one thing that happened one day."

Trench coats were banned, and the library was torn down, replaced with a memorial. "They changed the tone of the fire alarm [because during the shooting] it went on and on in parts of the school, so a lot of kids had that sound embedded in their heads. And then they did a few mock drills to get people desensitized. The first time, I had a panic attack right there in the classroom. The second time, I got nervous but it wasn't as bad. The third time, I was OK with it."

yotrak/iStock

In the first year back, students were incredibly nice to each other. But then new students who hadn't witnessed the shooting started coming, and slowly Columbine went back to being just another school full of regular (read: mostly jerky) teenagers. Time heals all wounds, and teens getting back to being snarky dicks toward each other marks the passing of time as well as anything else.

#3. The Consequences From One Event Can Last A Lifetime

Amanda still has panic attacks over 17 years later. In terms of embedded high school trauma, "surviving a shooting" ranks a little higher than "getting rejected by the classmate from social studies."

"[They're] triggered by things like random loud noises. I can never figure out when it's going to be OK. Sometimes [fireworks] will send me into a frenzy, and other times I'm like 'Yeah, I love fireworks!' My husband does World War II reenacting, and I've gone to a couple of events. Sometimes I'm OK, and sometimes I'll start crying. No matter how much I tell myself that it's just a game with blanks, sometimes I still freak out."

You'd assume that the worst of it would come in the weeks and months right after the shooting, but it took several years for symptoms of PTSD to show up.



KatarzynaBialasiewicz/iStock

As we've mentioned before, PTSD plays by its own set of arbitrary and life-destroying rules.

"The first couple of years were actually some of the best ones, because you're around people who all went through the same thing. But then everyone goes their separate ways, and all of a sudden you're surrounded by new people who have no clue what happened. They brought in extra counselors for two years. I started showing symptoms after, but the school district was like, 'Oh, we can't do anything now, sorry.' I got diagnosed with panic disorder twice, but part of me has just kind of given up. It's been too long, I just feel like no one is going to care."

It's easy to forget that people exist after the media stops talking about them -- you only remember Vanilla Ice because we mentioned him right now -- but a few minutes of chaos can be part of a person's life forever, long after the rest of the world has moved on.



MarkCoffeyPhoto/iStock

Until your pain gets dragged out as a political football when it happens again ... and again ... and again ...

"I'm in a master's program [doing research]. I was curious about the long-term prospects for the mental health of people involved in a school shooting. So I put up a survey, and it was so depressing. One girl said that she no longer wears high heels in case she needs to start running. Another person said they became an alcoholic, it took them years to get sober. It made me feel like I wasn't the only one who was screwed up. But no one really wants to talk about this stuff."




#2. "Columbine Tourism" Is A Thing

A year and a half after the shooting, Amanda got a cashier job at a Walgreens down the street from the school. "During the summer, you could always tell who the tourists were, because they'd make sure no one was listening, then lean in close and say, 'Is that Columbine High School down the street?' 'Yeah.' So they'd look at me, cock their head, study my features, and then say, 'Were you old enough to have been there that day?' 'Yeah.' About half would then say, 'Oh god, I'm so sorry,' and the other half would get morbidly curious and be like, 'Did you see them come in? Did you see anyone get shot?' It was the same questions over and over again. Even now, tour buses go by the school and people pose by the sign to get pictures."




Some manage to be fairly respectful. The others? Well ...

Yeah, that really happens. Imagine tour groups stopping by your grandma's tombstone so they can get new Facebook profile pics. If there's a morbid event in human history, you can bet that some people are creepily obsessed with it. Amanda made a series of YouTube videos in which she discusses the shooting, and she's received weird responses from people who don't believe her, who think Harris and Klebold were heroes, or who are simply general maniacs.




"Someone the other day asked me if I saw blood on the ceiling where Eric and Dylan shot themselves. [Some people] think of the weirdest, smallest details to nitpick. They find one little thing that varies from the official account, and then it's like, 'Oh my God, you're a liar!'"

 6 months ago
Fuck this bullshit long live Eric and Dylan
Reply • 16  
Hide replies ^




 2 months ago
AMEN
Reply •  

 3 weeks ago
mission failed well get em next time rip eric and dylan
Reply • 1  




YouTube

 2 hours ago
people fuckin lie all the time it was a fucking drill and noone died so get a fuckin life...
Reply •  




YouTube




 4 months ago
Eric Harris is adorable.
Reply • 39  




YouTube

 1 month ago
ATTENTION: AMANDA DURAN IS A LYING ATTENTION SEEKING BITCH!
Reply • 1  
View all 2 replies v

YouTube

 REB VoDka 3 months ago
+Amanda Duran do you have post Trumatic stress disorder
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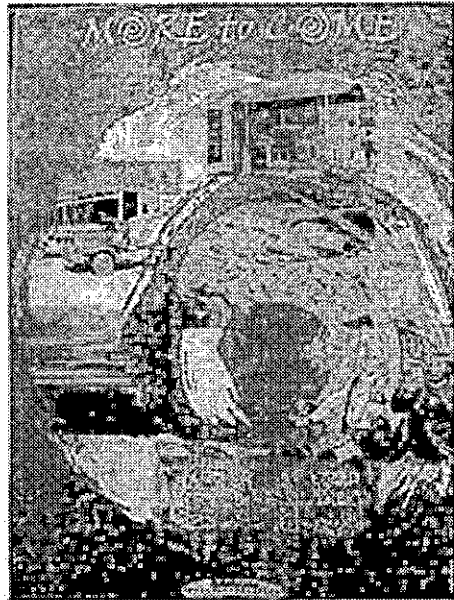
 **Amanda Duran** 3 months ago
+REB VoDka I have a diagnosis of panic disorder.
Reply •  

 REB VoDka 3 months ago
+Amanda Duran oh dont worry about my name I just study the killers and analyze what they did and the reasons why its a profound intrest
Reply •  

YouTube

REB and VoDka were the names that Harris and Klebold used for online gaming. So that's like hearing "Oh, don't worry, I just like knives!" from someone standing over your bed with a knife.

Then there are the people who collect memorabilia. Amanda's mom turned down an unsolicited \$10,000 offer for Joe's trench coat. Here's someone on the Columbine High School Massacre Discussion Forum (over 40,000 posts!) trying to track down Harris' car because he has a "soft spot for Hondas of the 1980s and early 1990s." Sure, that's the reason. You can buy Columbine's 1998 yearbook for a mere \$1,750.



Jefferson County Public Schools

Marking the first time in history that a yearbook had any value after graduation.

There's also a little cult, mostly found on Tumblr, that's fascinated with the shooting and is openly supportive of it. Thanks to the magic of the internet, Amanda can find people who are incredibly kind to her *and* people who wish that she had been one of the victims in the span of about 20 seconds.



This is Eric Harris.
Eric Harris hates everyone.
Eric Harris
is going to buy a lot of guns.
Eric Harris is Godlike.
Be like Eric Harris.

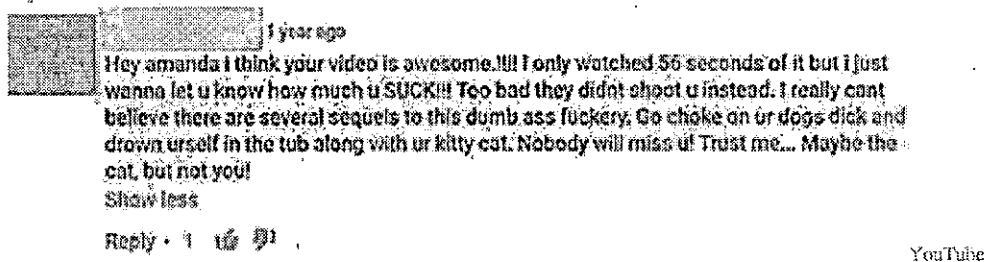


tumblr

You wouldn't have thought this meme had room to get shittier, but there you go.

"I want to guess that those are teenagers who want to get revenge on their so-called bullies. I was bullied in middle school myself. I understand wanting to get revenge for being treated like crap. But I didn't go out and hurt anyone. [Harris and Klebold] didn't get revenge at all; they just wanted their names to be famous."

It's understandable that people are fascinated with a shocking historical event. The only difference between most people obsessed with Columbine and people who are trying to solve the Jack the Ripper case is time. But that's a big goddamn difference when victims who are still having panic attacks can see comments like this:



Don't punch your screen quite yet. We're almost to the end.

#1. The Media Still Doesn't Know How To Handle Shootings

Amanda read the newspaper (for our younger readers, the internet used to be printed out and delivered by hand every morning) the day after the shooting, and she wasn't impressed by what she saw. "One picture took up half the page. It showed a kid lying dead. That was how his parents learned that he had died. Why would they publish that picture without informing his parents first?"

Amanda had been interviewed but didn't like how she was quoted, which is the only reason we refrained from manipulating her quotes to imply that she wants you to send us money. "They were choosy with my words and put things out of context. They would omit certain details to make it sound more dramatic. It seemed like they spent way too much time focusing on Eric and Dylan and not on the kids they hurt. I can see why people would want to pick apart their lives and try to understand what they were thinking, but you really can't know unless you were them."

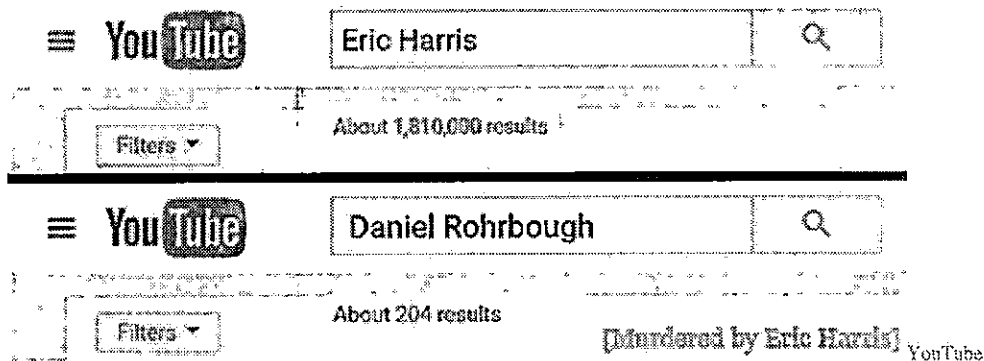


Via YouTube

If anyone could figure out the mind of a mass shooter, we might not see quite so many.

At the time, the shooting was blamed on everything from bullying to video games to music, while Harris and Klebold were falsely declared to have been targeting specific groups, ranging from jocks to minorities. That annoyed Amanda and her peers. Not only did most of them not even know the shooters, but many played video games and listened to Marilyn Mason themselves, yet somehow managed to avoid staging a massacre. And to Amanda, coverage of shootings hasn't improved since.

"They plaster the shooters everywhere and dissect their lives. You never hear about the victims. They get lost, and the shooters get exactly what they wanted."



It doesn't take much searching to see who's getting all the tribute videos.

Amanda's not kidding when she says "dissect." CNN made an interactive timeline that used over 100 diagrams to show the events of Columbine minute by minute, with all the elegance the internet of 1999 had to offer. Because we're sure the exact moment and location that Harris took off his trench coat is of tremendous value to the average citizen. Meanwhile, in what must be a complete coincidence, the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech shooting cited Harris and Klebold as an influence, and dozens of other shootings have been linked to or have taken some sort of inspiration from Columbine.

We tell ourselves it's all a search for answers, that if we find the right series of clues hidden in the shooter's journals and YouTube videos, we can unlock the human cheat code that will prevent this from ever happening again. But when shootings end, the perpetrators are dead or in jail -- there's nothing we can do about them. The survivors and the families of the victims are the ones who need our attention and help. And they're the ones who get ignored in our rush to discover what pictures the shooter shared on Facebook seven years ago.



Via Wikipedia

Spend enough time poring over a tragedy, and you can almost forget that *THIS IS NOT ENTERTAINMENT*.

"We have to take the focus off of the shooter. Giving press to them is exactly what they want. We have to focus on the victims. Because it's not just 'Oh, they got shot, they're going to be in the hospital for a week and then they'll be OK!' The shooting may have only taken 10 minutes, but the effects can go on for years. It doesn't end when people have physically healed. It doesn't end when the press packs up and leaves town to focus on the next shooting. It lasts a lifetime."