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## A Personal Narrative of the Columbine Community

Amidst the countless school shootings occurring nowadays, more and more people are unfortunately beginning to form their own personal narratives with shootings. As the number of people with these stories increases, the amount of exposure increases and the battle to end school shootings is fueled. I may not have a direct experience with a shooting but living in a community that has been severely affected by a shooting has exposed me to the dynamics such a community holds. I am born and raised in Littleton, Colorado which is home to the infamous Columbine High School. My entire life, I have been constantly reminded of the deadly shooting that occurred in March of 1999 and the consequences it has brought to both me and the community.

My Columbine narrative begins years before even attending the school. I vaguely remember a moment at recess in elementary school when I was gathered with a group of my friends. They were discussing a topic I had no knowledge about—high school. Names of high schools were mentioned and it all seemed foreign to me, but I came to the realization that I would eventually be attending one of these schools. Columbine was frequently referred to and several of the kids explained how Columbine was the best place to attend. I asked what all the buzz concerning this school was about, and I was told that Columbine was the coolest school because of some bad event that had happened there several years ago. There was a sort of higher social status formed around whether you were attending the high school or not, and it was all based off a terrible event that none of us had knowledge about. Little did I know that my newfound interest in a school I would be attending about three years from that moment stemmed from the first modern school shooting in American history.

Attending Columbine High School, I expected the shooting to be a regular topic of conversation, but in reality this was not the case. In fact, it was hardly mentioned at all. Besides a plaque outside the library honoring the lives lost on April 20<sup>th</sup>, there was nothing directly distinguishing Columbine from any other school I had visited before. However, being a student at Columbine I noticed a unique sense of community. The community was ultimately held together by principal Frank DeAngelis who was principal at the time of the tragedy as well. His heroic efforts during the shooting and strength to continue as principal, when many teachers decided to retire, is unrivaled. Any time that I was in his presence, his warm, comforting, and humorous demeanor lightened my mood. Mr. DeAngelis was the father figure of the Columbine community. In the literal sense of father, he would refer to the student of his school as his kids, and every day Mr. DeAngelis would find a way to brighten students' day and improve Columbine as a school.

Mr. DeAngelis always ensured that Columbine was held to the highest standard of pride. Pride days were consistently held within the school, with special events, bands marching through the halls, and assemblies creating an incredible energy. I remember reading in a news source that Columbine High School holds the greatest pride of any school in the nation, and while I take great pleasure in having attended such a school, I firmly hold my belief that Columbine was no different than most prideful schools. Our assemblies were grand; in Mr. DeAngelis's final year working at Columbine (my junior year) he even conquered his fear of heights by swinging from a rope the entire length of the gymnasium. The issue I see is that there is an expectation for Columbine to be the best because of a tragedy that it was able to overcome. If I remember correctly, two of the four final assemblies I experienced in my high school career were filmed by outside journalists and displayed on television. The most prideful event of Columbine's school

year was publicized and portrayed an image that the average day at Columbine is no different. Of course, there is plenty of pride at the school, but it's the expectations from those outside the community that paint Columbine as unrealistically unique.

There was a point as a freshman where I came to the realization that the Columbine of today is not, and should never be, defined by the horrific event in its past. In my final year attending the school, I received a shirt with "Rebel Pride" on the front side and "You are a Rebel for life and no one can ever take that away from you". Both sayings are commonly quoted in articles concerning the school and, unfortunately, the shooting. I have seen how many other high schools wear very similar shirts with statements of pride, and for the public to emphasize these statements for Columbine unnecessarily places Columbine on a pedestal of its own when, 20 years after the horrific event, it is ultimately no different than most other high schools.

Public interest in Columbine High School, since the day of the shooting, has placed the Columbine community in a bubble separated from 'normal' society. With the Columbine shooting being the first modern school shooting, the community has become a lab rat being prodded at carelessly and ignorantly. Beyond the journalists documenting assemblies, interviewers are constantly bombarding Columbine students and teachers alike. In my years of attendance, I was warned several times by teachers to be aware of interviewers prowling the sidewalks right outside school boundaries. There was even an instance where I was walking back from lunch and was approached by an interviewer. Although I politely declined, I had heard of other students being asked such questions such as how the shooting affects their experience at Columbine today. Once again, nearly two decades after the shooting Columbine is no different than any other high school. Teachers also warned us to distance ourselves from tourists. Yes, tourists! I had never seen such a disturbing thing myself, but apparently there had been several

occasions in Columbine's past where tour busses had driven by the school simply with the intention of getting a glimpse and taking pictures of our infamous school. While Columbine is a high school to those in its community, many people outside the bubble have created an alternate meaning to the name "Columbine" that instead signifies one giant memorial or even a museum. It is a defilement of the strength the Columbine community has had to move past the shooting and create a safe and comfortable environment for students.

Columbine High School may represent a museum to those who are ignorant, but the ignorance does not end there. The name of Columbine itself has been altered because of the general public's view of Columbine as a school shooting site, drawing away the image of it being a typical school. Several times I have met individuals who refer to Columbine high school as "*the* Columbine" or even refer to the location as an event—"the Columbine shooting". I would be lying if I said that this has not aggravated me each time such terms have crossed my ears.

Keith Basso describes how a location and time are combined in Apache culture, and it is very similar to how Columbine is linked to a specific moment in time. As Basso maps out the territory owned by the Apache, he is introduced to a location called Juniper Tree Stands Alone. The name was created when an Apache tribe first inhabited the area, and they used the landscape to name it. Initial discovery of the area by ancestors then became sacred through its name. Referring to Columbine as "the Columbine shooting" directly relates to Juniper Tree Standing Alone as there was the moment in time the name refers to, originates from, and links to the name itself. All of this can be explained through a chronotope. Basso uses a definition by Mikail Bakhtin to explain the term chronotope: ". . . space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people. . . . Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its

members' images of themselves'" (62). In terms of Columbine, the name itself stands as a monument of strength and endurance within the community due to an event in its past. Outside the community bubble, the name "Columbine" is strictly linked to the shooting. Beyond chronotopes, people calling Columbine "*the* Columbine" is similar to how non-indigenous people may call a Native American settlement a reservation which both have negative connotations. On the other hand, Native Americans within the bubble of their reservation have very sacred names, such as Juniper Tree Stands Alone, and the Columbine community prefers the stigma-lacking name of Columbine High School.

Further examples of ignorance that I have encountered are the questions I am asked concerning Columbine High School. Here are a few examples: "are there still bullet holes?"; "is there still blood"; "were you there when the shooting happened"; "isn't that where the shooting happened?". Amazingly enough, I have been asked the first two questions on more than a few occasions. I understand that no one is completely serious when asking such questions, but there is such an ignorance and disrespect that many have outside the Columbine bubble making the school seem like a permanent warzone. With the last question listed, Columbine being labeled as a shooting scene is a continuation of the ignorance over the school being a normal high school and creating a label based off the past and not the present. *Journeys to Complete the Work*, by Atalay, Shannon, and Swogger, details the initiative being taken to return Native American artifacts and human remains to the indigenous tribes they belong to. Ideally, the name and identity of "Columbine High School" should be returned in a similar manner to the 'indigenous' Columbine community by outsiders.

Through the eyes of a Columbine community member, Columbine High School may be just another high school among the several thousand in the country. However, those outside the

community place a bubble around the school that creates an environment and names far from anything considered normal for a high school. Ignorance may not be purposeful, but it is important for all to understand that a shooting should not define a place but rather the endurance of the community.

## References

Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1996.