

THE CRISIS AND ITS CRISES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
PUBLIC INFORMATION RESPONSE TO THE
COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

by

KARI ELIZABETH SKOOG

A THESIS

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for the degree of
Bachelor of Science

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Joint Statement of the Council

The Council of the City of New York, on the 12th day of January, 1997, at a public hearing held at the City Hall, New York, New York, in the presence of the following members of the Council:

Mayor: Michael R. Bloomberg
Deputy Mayor: Thomas H. Yonkin
Council Members: Andrew L. Spanio, Joseph L. L. ...

... and the following members of the Council:

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APPROVED:

Tom Bivins

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An Abstract of the Thesis of

Kari Elizabeth Skoog for the degree of Bachelor of Science

in the School of Journalism and Communication to be taken June 2000

Title: THE CRISIS AND ITS CRISES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PUBLIC
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Approved: _____

Tom Bivins

On April 20, 1999, America was witness to the worst school shooting in a suburban, middle class neighborhood of its time at Columbine High School. Everyone assumed it would never happen in Littleton, Colorado, but it did and the public information officers of three Jefferson County agencies assumed the task of getting the information out to the media and the community as quickly as possible.

While there is no public relations textbook on how to control a crisis like the Columbine shootings, there are basic guidelines agreed upon by public relations professionals that will lead to the successful control of the crisis. The public information response to the Columbine shootings and the crises that followed are evaluated based on these criteria and responses from the media involved in covering the shootings. Based on the evaluation, some general and important conclusions are made about the mistakes and successes of the public information response to the Columbine shootings.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The community and school officials said it could never happen in Littleton, Colorado. The city is composed of suburban, white, middle-class neighborhoods. Columbine High School, one of two high schools in the city, boasts above average SAT scores and state-winning athletes. No, violence does not happen here. On April 20, 1999, it did happen, though, leaving the community, county and city officials and the world wondering why. The most deadly and widely publicized school shootings in American history occurred at 11:15 a.m. that day and marked the beginning of a crisis that lingers today, one year later.

Two high school students, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, entered Columbine High School at 11:00 a.m. with more than two duffel bags full of propane-tank bombs, which they left in the cafeteria.¹ The students then went back out to their cars and grabbed their weapons and ammunition. While approaching the school, they opened fire on students outside, killing the first two of their 13 victims. The bombs did not go off as planned, and Klebold and Harris then began their killing spree. At 12:05 p.m., the shots ceased as Klebold and Harris killed themselves to make the death toll 15 with 28 wounded.²

¹ Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche, "The Columbine Tapes," *Time*, 20 December 1999, 40.

² Mark Obmascik, "High School Massacre: Columbine bloodbath leaves up to 25 dead," *Denver Post*, 21 April 1999, sec. A, p. 1.

As the killing ended, the pandemonium outside of the school was just getting started. More than 750 media were on site watching nearly 900 emergency personnel and law enforcement officials from more than 15 jurisdictions³ trying to control the situation. Inside the school, public information officers (PIOs) struggled to get as much information as possible to answer the 1,000 phone calls coming in and the hundreds of questions from parents and reporters. Chaos was the only way to describe the war scene outside of Columbine High School. A crisis erupted and the public information officers from the Jefferson County School District, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and the District Attorney's Office thrust themselves into emergency mode to gain control and disperse the information as best they could. The Columbine shootings were not the first of this nature, however.

Since 1996, 12 school shootings occurred in predominantly white, affluent, suburban, middle-class communities, and the school districts and jurisdictions involved were not as prepared as they could have been. Why? Because they thought it would never happen in their communities.⁴ Inner-city school officials deal with the violence and the deaths, not those in suburban schools. The media and the public information officers who covered and worked on the Columbine shootings agree that they had never

³ Rich Long, presentation, Brigham Young University, 3 January 2000.

⁴ Peggy Lowe, interview by author, telephone, 20 January 2000.

experienced anything like this; 'never 15 murders and never school shootings'.⁵ The crisis and the chaos of that first day continue to erupt.

From the memorials to funerals and graduation to the suicide of a victim's mother, from the first day back at school to the release of videotapes made by the killers to *Time* magazine, the Columbine High School disaster has not let up since day one. Marilyn Saltzman, manager of communications services for the Jefferson County Public Schools, has an on-going deal with another public information officer that the first day they do not receive a phone call about Columbine, they will go to lunch.⁶ They have yet to see the day. Pam Russell, director of public relations for the Jefferson County District Attorney, could not get through three times out of five on her cell phone that first day due to the cell phone traffic on the school grounds. Air Touch Cellular donated additional phones and Russell, with two cell phones, answering media calls round the clock, went through two to three batteries a day for the first two weeks.⁷ Steve Davis, the Public Information Officer for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and the official spokesperson of the criminal investigation of the Columbine High School shootings, said that just two weeks out from the initial crisis, he received 321 pages on his pager, 50 emails per hour and over 50 voice mail messages from the media in one day.⁸ The PIOs

⁵ Kevin Vaughan, interview by author, telephone, 28 January 2000.

⁶ Marilyn Saltzman, interview by author, telephone, 20 January 2000.

⁷ Pam Russell, interview by author, telephone, 11 February 2000.

⁸ Steve Davis, interview by author, telephone, 1 March 2000.

struggled to get out as much information as they could while working 20-22 hour days without food and sleep.

My thesis project is an analytical look at the response to the shootings at Columbine High School and to four key events tied to the shootings that followed by three key PIOs. Marilyn Saltzman, Pam Russell and Steve Davis are still controlling and communicating information about the crisis today and will continue to do. The project is an in-depth look at personal accounts from the PIOs and the response and critique of local and national media representatives from newspapers and television. Background research on crisis communications and management is presented and will be used as a reference to analyze the PIO response during the Columbine crisis. This report will identify the errors made in the crisis communication management by the PIOs and what worked for them so that communities and other school districts can learn from their mistakes and account for their successes.

CHAPTER TWO

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials and Sources Used

A variety of sources and research materials were used to complete this project, ranging from telephone interviews to articles in journals and trade publications. To start, I used several public relations academic journals and books, as well as case studies for a complete background on crisis communications and management. While the material is beneficial in recommending and suggesting basic guidelines for ways to handle crises, they were read with the understanding that every crisis calls for different measures and nothing can always be by the book. A summary of the background information compiled as it relates to the Columbine crisis is presented in the following section and will serve as a reference for analysis of the PIO response to the shootings at Columbine High School.

After conducting my initial academic research, I turned to newspapers and news magazines for an historical account of the Columbine High School shootings. In addition to the several interviews I conducted, the newspapers provided a background of the details and the “play-by-play” retelling of what happened on April 20, 1999, in Littleton and in the several months that followed. I looked specifically at the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* newspapers because they are local to the Littleton and Denver area. The newspapers also extensively covered the shootings because of their close link to the community. In several instances, the reporters from these papers had children in

nearby schools, Columbine High School or they knew of students at Columbine. Both the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* still cover issues related to Columbine weekly and, until a couple of months ago, daily. The local interest combined with the fact that the reporters are local means that the stories do not end. The two papers covered every catastrophe and mini-crisis that followed the shootings and continue to do so even after the one-year anniversary.

For a national perspective, I looked specifically at the controversial *Time* magazine article with detailed excerpts from the videotapes made by Klebold and Harris before they killed themselves and their peers. This article was a critical part of my research for several reasons. First, I wanted some idea of how national reporters covered the shootings and what, specifically, they covered. Second, my project does look at several crises that followed the shootings, which required some form of PIO response. The release of the videotapes to *Time* magazine by the Jefferson County Sheriff and then the article about the tapes in the December 20, 1999, issue was extremely controversial and caused uproar among the victims' families as well as among local reporters who were barred from viewing the tapes. The "suicide" videotapes were withheld from victims' families because the Jefferson County sheriff's office considered them evidence, even though they did not provide much information to investigators other than that Harris and Klebold were the only perpetrators.⁹

⁹ Peter Chronis and Howard Pankratz, "Prosecutor, schools chief blast sheriff's officials," *Denver Post*, 14 December 1999, sec. A, p. 8.

The release to *Time* magazine right before Christmas was upsetting news to local media, school officials, the district attorney and victims because it re-opened old wounds and showed preference by the sheriff's office to a national magazine.

The article in *Time* magazine not only provides background on what was on those tapes, but also the nature of the coverage and an assessment of the public officials involved and the work they did. Other random articles from national newspapers such as the *New York Times* were referenced as well, though not as often as the local newspapers or the *Time* magazine article.

Finally, the last area of research conducted was in the form of interviews. I spoke with public information officers from three agencies involved in controlling the information from the Columbine shootings including Marilyn Saltzman, communications services manager for Jefferson County Public Schools; Steve Davis, public information officer for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, and Pam Russell, director of public relations for the Jefferson County District Attorney's Office. These PIOs worked directly with one another and emergency personnel to control information and the emergency site. The point of the interviews was to get their personal accounts of what happened and their ideas as to what needs improving before the next crisis erupts.

I also interviewed media representatives including three local reporters: Peggy Lowe from the *Denver Post* and Kevin Vaughan from the *Rocky Mountain News*; and one national television reporter, Carol McKinley, Fox News Channel correspondent. Essential to my analysis of the PIO response to the Columbine shootings is how well

their response worked in the eyes of the receivers of their information, the media. The local reporters proved to be the most helpful in analyzing the PIOs because of their closeness and the relationships that had formed over several years of working together. The interview with the national reporter provided insight into how well this crisis was controlled in relation to other national crises of the same nature; Carol McKinley also covered the Thurston High School shootings in Springfield, Oregon.

All of the interviews took place over the telephone with follow up and additional questions answered by email. While my first choice and preference was to go to Littleton, CO, and interview the PIOs and local reporters in person, money and lack of sufficient time prevented me from doing so. Most of the PIOs are still so busy with the Columbine shootings that they were pleasantly surprised to hear that they could just do the interview over the phone at their convenience. The phone interviews proved to be very resourceful and revealing of what really happened. Much of my analysis of the PIO response will be from their personal accounts and the media's assessment of the response taken from the interviews.

My research is a complete, detailed compilation of what could or should have been done to control the information during the Columbine crises, what was actually done, and what mistakes were made. The goal is to put the information together in a comprehensive format so that others can learn from the Columbine High School tragedy and make the necessary changes within their own schools or organizations so that the successes and not the mistakes are repeated.

Crisis Communications and Management Background

In order to manage and control communication amidst a crisis, one must have a clear understanding of what a crisis is. Of course, the definition of a crisis is open to interpretation depending on the person dealing with the crisis and who or what is involved, but for the purposes of this project, I chose to define the crisis of the Columbine High School shootings by the very nature of what made it so large. Richard Long, professor of communications at Brigham Young University, uses the Institute for Crisis Management's definition of a crisis, and it applies well to the Columbine tragedy. A crisis is "a significant business disruption which results in extensive news media coverage and public scrutiny."¹⁰ The disruption is seldom expected and often causes "uncertainty and instability"¹¹ among the public and the media in their search for information. Thus, the point of crisis communication and the responsibility of public information officers during a crisis are to fill "the information gap"¹² by disseminating information to the media and other publics.

In order to gain control of the crisis, the communication involves important principles. James Lukaszewski, chairman of the Lukaszewski Group and a member of Public Relations Society of America, explains that the first principle is to communicate

¹⁰ Rich Long, presentation.

¹¹ Andi Stein, "Consequences of Crisis: the Public Information Response to the Thurston High School Shootings," paper presented to the Public Relations Society of America, Anaheim, CA, October 1999, 2.

¹² Ibid.

with those affected most by the crisis. He says that the involved publics, the various groups of people affected by the organization or company, should be prioritized as follows:¹³

Priority #1	Those most directly affected (victims, intended and unintended)
Priority #2	Employees (sometimes they are victims, too.)
Priority #3	Those indirectly affected – the community, government, regulators, and third parties.
Priority #4	The news media and other channel of external communication.

This report will look primarily at how the PIOs dealing with the Columbine shootings controlled the information to and requests from the media. Some mention of responsibilities to the victims, employees and the community will be included, however, where applicable.

In order to contain the situation and to initiate orderly responses to the important priority publics listed above, it is important to establish perimeters around the physical site of the crisis. The perimeters allow for complete screening of the media and officials entering and exiting the site, as well as to prevent the public from attempts to enter the site. The emergency perimeters provide control over physical response and over the dissemination of information in addition to the prevention of “interference with the

¹³ James Lukaszewski, “Establishing Individual and Corporate Crisis Communication Standards: the Principles and Protocols,” *Public Relations Quarterly* 42:3 (Fall 1997): 8-9.

emergency responders and victims.”¹⁴ Alan Bernstein, president of PACE Incorporated, categorizes crises into three different situations where perimeters should be set: absolutely “No Go” situations, limited access situations and situations where the press is free to go where they like. For the purposes of this project, the first situation, absolutely “No-Go,” applies most directly to the Columbine crisis. This type of situation renders the crisis “too volatile or too dangerous, or the response too precarious to permit either the news media or the public onto the site.”¹⁵ In a “No-Go” situation, the inner perimeter around the incident site should be established first. Secondly, a “press staging area” should be set along the outside of the first perimeter set. Finally, outside of the press staging area, is the outer perimeter used to keep the general public away from the scene. With this perimeter formation, information can easily be disseminated to the media, and emergency personnel can do their job with little distraction from reporters and the public.

Furthermore, Lukaszewski notes, and other public relations experts agree, that in addition to communicating with those most directly affected by the crisis first and setting the perimeters, the next communication principle is to activate an emergency operations or command center. The center should be the hub of all communication activity, it should be close to the location of the crisis, and all press materials and inquiries should

¹⁴ Alan B. Bernstein, *The Emergency Public Relations Manual: Third Edition*. New Jersey: PASE Incorporated, 1987: 40.

¹⁵ Ibid, 41.

be developed and dispersed at this one local site.¹⁶ The goal of all crisis communication should be consistency and accuracy. With a central location and one voice representing the many facets of the community involved, information can be evaluated and dispersed effectively and quickly.

Preparation of the command center involves strategic planning and must be in place almost immediately after learning of the crisis. In the case where several agencies or jurisdictions are involved in covering the crisis, it is necessary that there be one established command center to eliminate any chance for rumors or contradicting information. Laurence Barton, former associate professor of management at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, suggests a few key points to keep in mind when operating a crisis or command center. He explains that management or the public information officer should “clearly instruct crisis staffers whether they can speak only to the consumers, or only to the press, or to anyone who calls in.”¹⁷ It is essential to give the people manning the telephones at the command center some sort of script or consistent information so that as questions are posed, the crisis staff can provide the same information.

Furthermore, Barton suggests setting security measures for entrance into the command center before it is open to the press and other various community figures. It is also important to consider adequate power supply for video, computer, phone, fax and

¹⁶ Lukaszewski, 9.

¹⁷ Laurence Barton, *Crisis in Organizations: Managing and Communicating in the Heat of Chaos*. (Cincinnati, OH: South-Western Publishing Co., 1993), 184-185.

other equipment. Multiple outlets and telephone jacks may need to be installed, as well. As a preparedness technique, many companies or organizations have extra phones in storage for emergencies or crises. The same measure should be taken for fax machines. Important to the immediate distribution of new releases, fact sheets, media advisories and other information, there should be a minimum of three fax machines on site at the command center.¹⁸ Barton suggests filling a file cabinet ‘with reams of 8 ½ x 11-inch paper’ and with copies of press kits for the company or organization in the event that reporters’ request general and/or background information.¹⁹ The press kits should contain photographs of management and senior officers, as the media will often request these items. A copy machine should also be made available to the media at the command center so that copies of requested information could be made. These are just a few important and necessary steps that should be taken while setting up a command center. Of course, different crises will demand different supplies and varying set-ups of the command center.

In addition to the command center is the appointment of a spokesperson for information on the crisis. Lukaszewski highlights the importance of “speaking with one

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

voice, but not necessarily with a single spokesperson.”²⁰ When the crisis is large enough that several agencies and organizations are involved, one spokesperson may not be enough. The strategy of all spokespersons should be, however, to be consistent and accurate in their response to media and community inquiries. While often times the public relations practitioner or media relations manager is the most appropriate spokesperson, reporters will go after upper management. Regardless of who the spokesperson may be, the person must be knowledgeable and updated constantly on new and evolving information. It is essential that the spokespeople realize that the primary reason the organization’s viewpoint does not get out to the public is that the media are unable to find someone “in the know” who can speak with them.²¹

Another crucial part of crisis communications is to take a proactive approach to a situation that calls for reactive measures. “Some practitioners argue that it is impossible to really get ready for a sweeping disaster. Emergency planning, however, must be proactive in order to be prepared for a reactive response to an emergency,” one public relations textbook explains.²² There is no dispute that one cannot be fully prepared for the future, but having the basics of the command center laid out, with a stock supply of extra materials and equipment, the primary spokesperson chosen ahead of time and duties assigned to specific people, these few preparations can make things go smoothly.

²⁰ Lukaszewski, 8.

²¹ Lynn M. Zoch and Sonya Forte Duhe, “Feeding the Media” During a Crisis: A Nationwide Look,” *Public Relations Quarterly* 42:3 (Fall 1997): 17.

²² Jerry A. Hendrix, *Public Relations Cases*, 4th ed., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 414.

Finally, an important principle to remember is that cooperation with the media will only increase the chance of correct and factual reports to the public. The media, while maybe not the first priority, within minutes, have the ability to turn the controlled crisis into an inaccurate and sensationalized news report. PIOs need to be prepared and make the media an important priority and be open and willing to answer their questions and concerns. It is important to “anticipate the media’s questions”²³ before the crisis occurs because, once it hits, the media will want enormous amounts of information constantly. The important point to remember is that reporters need information as it becomes available.²⁴ With these principles in mind, the PIOs, in case of a crisis, can avoid a communications disaster.

²³ Steven Fink, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*, New York: AMACOM, 1986, 97.

²⁴ Zoch and Duhe, 17.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

The Columbine High School shootings began at 11:30 a.m. on April 20, 1999, when Klebold and Harris entered their school, shot anyone and everyone in sight, killing 13 people, and ended when they killed themselves. The crisis communications nightmare began at the same time. The shootings ended at what officials believe to be 12:00 p.m., but the crisis communications continued through the next few weeks and even continue today. The shootings brought with them several other crises of their own. While nothing was as time consuming or personally demanding as the initial shootings themselves, PIOs identified a few key incidents that occurred in the months that followed. Each incident provoked extensive media coverage, caught the attention of the community, and kept Columbine on the top of the Jefferson County PIOs' list of things to do. There never was an end to the shootings and the end is not in sight, even after the one-year anniversary, according to Saltzman and other PIOs.²⁵

The following section will lay out the Columbine crises beginning first with the shootings themselves. The shootings required two weeks of constant interviews for the

²⁵ Saltzman, interview.

PIOs with reporters from all over the country and the world and marked the beginning of a long and tedious criminal investigation. PIOs and reporters interviewed identified the shootings as the most time consuming, as many worked 20+ hour days; however, their work was not done.

Memorials for the students, including physical, monetary and actual services, had to be planned and coordinated for the media. Graduation soon followed and drew vast amounts of media coverage to the dismay of students and their families. The summer proved to be relatively quiet until August when Columbine High School re-opened for the first day of school for the 1999-2000 year. Amidst the excitement of a new school year, the mother of one of a girl shot and paralyzed by the shootings committed suicide, marking an emotional and evaluative turning point for PIOs and reporters alike and finally, the *Time* magazine article in the December 20, 1999, issue on the videotapes made by the killers, Klebold and Harris. Right before Christmas, the community felt the pain all over again, and local reporters and parents of the victims were outraged because they never had the chance to see the tapes first. Instead, they read about them in a national magazine. Each incident kept the wounds open a little longer and required the PIOs to continue their work. The results below are a combination of personal accounts from PIOs, reporters and information taken from newspaper stories on Columbine.

The Shootings, April 20, 1999, and Two Weeks Out

The shootings caught everyone off-guard. Tuesday was a normal day. Pam Russell, director of public relations for the District Attorney's Office, was on the phone with a reporter for a weekly paper doing an interview. Steve Davis was still catching up as the PIO for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department after returning from vacation the day before. Marilyn Saltzman, public relations manager for Jefferson County Public Schools, was at an annual meeting with her entire staff. What they each learned after 11:30 a.m. that 20th day in April was much unexpected.

The morning of April 20, 1999, began at 11:00 a.m. as over 900 students were in the school cafeteria for lunch, the school library to study or in one of the school's several classrooms. At 11:30 a.m., Harris and Klebold opened fire, killing and injuring students and teachers, first in the school parking lot and then in the cafeteria, the hallways and finally in the library. The library was the site of the most deaths among students and was also where Harris and Klebold ended their shooting spree by shooting themselves. By noon, police SWAT teams found several bombs surrounding the school. Ambulances and emergency personnel arrived at the scene to take the first round of injured students to the hospital. At the same time, school hotlines, the school district Web site and other forms of communication requested that parents look for and reunite with their children at Leawood Elementary.

By this time, local media and national media syndicates swarmed to the Columbine High School grounds. Within hours, more national and international reporters landed on the scene of the shootings, probing for information and interviews with victims and law enforcement officials. During the media frenzy, at approximately 12:30 p.m., SWAT teams entered the school to begin “a room-by-room sweep of the high school, checking every knapsack and desk”²⁶ for more explosives. At 2:30 p.m., the SWAT teams found and released hidden students in small groups. Several pictures in local and national newspapers and magazines captured the small groups running from the school grounds with their hands above their heads to a holding area. At the holding station, police “frisked, questioned, offered medical care, and then bussed [the students] to Leawood elementary to be with their parents.”²⁷ At 4:00 p.m., Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone estimated 25 people dead, while police and SWAT teams still searched the library and the rest of the building for bodies and bombs. One half-hour later, the SWAT teams declared Columbine High School to be safe and at 6:15 p.m. the sheriff’s office declared the entire school “a massive crime scene.” The bodies of the deceased remained inside the school. Much to everyone’s surprise, another bomb went off later that evening, but no one was injured.²⁸ It was not until the following morning that a final and corrected death toll of 15 was released.

²⁶ “Timeline of events at Columbine High School,” *U.S. News Online*, 21 April 1999, <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/990426/ap0421b.htm>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

As the events of the first day unfolded, as described above, so began the work of three PIOs. Davis was the “principal PIO” and primary spokesperson for the Columbine shootings. Russell explained, “because the incident took place in their [Sheriff’s office] jurisdiction, any criminal investigation would be headed by them and any info[rmation] released would come from them.”²⁹ Therefore, when Davis arrived at CHS at 11:45 a.m., he recognized his immediate responsibility to deal with the media, and he needed to decide where to put them. Reporters came in from everywhere, and in order to disseminate information to them, Davis felt it necessary to have them all in one central location. Fortunately, Clement Park is located across the street from the high school and Davis made it the home base for the thousands of reporters who swarmed to Littleton to cover the crisis.

Davis and other PIOs had no time to breathe from the moment they reached the scene. Until 1:30 p.m., Davis did interviews with whomever asked, offering as much information as he possibly could. However, he and others quickly decided that in order to get the necessary information out to everyone who needed it, the first press conference would occur at 1:30 p.m.³⁰ This was the first of several hourly press conferences headed by Davis for the first two days after the shootings. Beginning early morning and stretching into the late night, Davis was in front of the cameras and anxious reporters all day long trying to disseminate information about the criminals, the victims and the

²⁹ Pam Russell, interview.

³⁰ Steve Davis, interview.

investigation. Because Davis could not get away from the crowd of reporters to get new information for the hourly news conferences, Russell acted as the liaison between him and her own jurisdiction, the district attorney's office. Even with Russell's help, though, it was apparent to everyone that Davis needed to get more help because "they [reporters] were coming in from everywhere."³¹

With reporters everywhere and Davis not being able to talk to everyone with the most current updates, reporters went for anyone they could find on that first day. Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone was on camera and answering media questions constantly. However, he did not give accurate facts at first because of the mass confusion with the SWAT officers and mixed information on the number dead. Stone said in an interview that the death toll could be as high as 25. *The New York Times*, Late Edition included this information in their coverage of the story on April 21, 1999. The Denver *Rocky Mountain News* "decided to produce an "Extra," an additional paper quickly released for downtown street sales on the same afternoon as major breaking news."³² After a 3:00 p.m. deadline was met with a front page claiming a possible death toll of 21, Stone announced the possible 25 dead, and the *Rocky Mountain News* quickly changed their headlines to read: "HORROR: Death toll could reach 25, including gunmen, after attack at Columbine High School."³³ With so many versions of the death toll and not

³¹ Ibid.

³² Julie Scelfo, "In Their Backyard," *Brill's Content* 2:6 (August 1999): 88.

³³ Ibid., 87.

enough people to get the correct information to the press, Davis and Russell agreed that something had to be done.

After deciding, “one voice was not enough,”³⁴ Russell put her boss, Dave Thomas, the district attorney for Jefferson County, out front. “He didn’t give specific numbers,” but he did clarify and/or confirm details. Thomas was also the spokesperson present at Leawood Elementary School. The school was a place of reunion for parents of students at CHS. The kids were taken to Leawood by bus to find their parents. Unfortunately, 12 parents would find that their children never made it through the massacre. The evening of April 20, 1999, Dave Thomas made the announcement to parents still waiting for their kids that they would need to bring any medical and dental records, photos and other belongings that may help identify bodies.³⁵ The message, devastating to the parents, was equally devastating to Thomas and Russell when they had to stand in front of parents and deliver it.

As the week went on, Davis, Russell and Saltzman from the school district worked 20-22 hour days and were lucky to return home for an hour or two of sleep and a cup of coffee. Several PIOs from other agencies in the community and even some past PIOs returned to help where possible. Several national and international agencies and organizations also joined the site within the first week to assist in several different ways.

³⁴ Pam Russell, interview.

³⁵ Ibid.

The primary PIOs (Saltzman, Davis and Russell) agreed to contact the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) on Thursday for assistance with a media analysis of what each newspaper, television station and radio stations reported on the Columbine shootings.³⁶ The representatives from FEMA also attended daily meetings with Saltzman, Davis, Russell and representatives from Jefferson County School District.³⁷

The Emergency Services Public Information Officers of Colorado (ESPIOC), a statewide association of public information officers of which Russell is a member, was also brought in for extra assistance. The group proved to be extremely helpful. It helped with much of the legwork of the crisis communication and management; including answering phones and making sure media requests for information and interviews were answered. Russell does not believe she and other PIOs on the case “would have done as well without [ESPIOC].”³⁸ The most useful of the ESPIOC’s work proved to be the information it collected from communities where similar crises occurred such as Springfield, Oregon, and Paducah, Kentucky. While it took a while to get the information, Russell believed that it was necessary to obtain it to judge how well they were handling their crisis and if they could be doing things differently. Instead, they found that for the most part, they were doing things right.³⁹

³⁶ Pam Russell, interview.

³⁷ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

³⁸ Pam Russell, interview.

³⁹ Pam Russell, interview

State and national organizations were not the only groups coming in to offer their expertise and services. Jim Parr, the past PIO for the Sheriff's office before Davis joined the group, also returned to help out, and he and Davis eventually worked out a schedule so that Davis could find some time to rest. Said Davis:

I'd come in [to the scene] at 4:00 a.m., work until 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. and then went to the office until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. He [Jim Parr] came in at noon and we overlapped a few hours so we could catch up on new information.⁴⁰

It was not until two weeks out from the shootings that Davis could actually report to his office at the start of each day. Saltzman did not return to the school district headquarters until two and a half months after the shootings. She and some other members of her staff relocated to the Jefferson County Public Library, which became the emergency command center. While Davis and Russell preoccupied themselves with the criminal investigations and media requests for updates on the victims and the killers, Saltzman was busy trying to get the kids to their parents and getting information to the parents and community members calling in about the whereabouts of their children.

Marilyn Saltzman's primary responsibility was to the students and the parents of the students. Her job the first day on the scene was to stick by Davis' side during interviews with the media to answer questions about school-related issues. Saltzman did not specifically address the kinds of issues and questions the media asked during our interview but did say that if the questions about the school district came up, Davis did not have to try to answer the questions if he did not know the answers.

⁴⁰ Steve Davis, interview.

One responsibility headed by Saltzman was the formation of the command post at the Jefferson County Public Library. Volunteers from school districts across the country and retired secretaries came in to help run the command post. Saltzman and others on her staff, including her boss, Rick Kaufman, devised an “organizational chart that included people in charge of internal and external events, media monitoring, research, etc.”⁴¹ The people in charge of these specific tasks would have daily debriefings and Saltzman said they typically took place in the middle of the night during the first week because there was no other time to have them.

The variety of communication used by Saltzman and the school district included meetings, email, voice mail messages and regular press conferences. She also prepared a fact sheet (appendix A) each day and faxed it out by 10:00 a.m. “to media, all district schools and departments and key communicators.”⁴² The Jefferson County School District also has a Web page (<http://jeffco.k12.co.us>) where she posted the daily fact sheet and other updates. Also on the web site was a list of key and common questions asked by parents and media alike with the answers from the school district. Saltzman made packets with information about all communication tools and venues used by the school district such as those just mentioned for the volunteers so that they could “become quickly oriented to what we were doing.”⁴³

⁴¹ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

The volunteers answered the 1,000 phone calls received a day and needed constant updates to answer questions correctly. Many of the incoming calls were from reporters requesting interviews and/or information. Saltzman and her team developed Media Interview Requests and Media Information Request forms (appendix B) so that any one of the volunteers could write down each request and file it immediately. Saltzman and her staff would then fill requests based on their media protocols and goals and objectives. “The goal was to keep students safe and to help students, families, staff and community begin to heal. Our protocol was to handle local media first, then national, then international.”⁴⁴ With the goal and protocol in mind, Saltzman did not arrange interviews for the media with students. Some interviews were set up with the student council president and a few for the back-to-school hype; however, most students worked directly with the media. Saltzman was responsible, however, for arranging interviews with the CHS principal, Frank DeAngelis.

When considering whether an interview would be granted, Saltzman looked at “what would help us heal and return to some sense of normalcy.”⁴⁵ It was three days after the shootings that DeAngelis finally talked to reporters and agreed to do a few interviews. Since then, Saltzman and her staff take thousands of requests and consider them one at a time. DeAngelis really needed to focus on getting the school put back

⁴⁴ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

together and thus, was not in the media limelight as much as the media and the nation may have liked.

Peggy Lowe, a reporter for the *Denver Post* said she was not sure why the school district was so protective of DeAngelis. She said that reporters were not able to talk to him for the first five to six days and even then, the school district only allowed one-on-one interviews.⁴⁶ DeAngelis was no stranger to his students and their families at Columbine, though. He did go to a local church the next day after the massacre to address parents and students.⁴⁷ The school district set up the event and did not invite the media to attend.

Saltzman, when not coordinating interviews with the school principal, was one of several school district officials who decided whether the CHS students would return to school the next day, where they would attend school, as well as whether the other 89,000 children in the district would attend school the next day. Reports of threats of more shootings incidents at other schools in the district made the decision easy; no one would attend school the next day. CHS students returned to classes on May 3, 1999, at Chatfield High School, another high school in the Jefferson County School District.

Along with Russell from the District Attorney's Office, Saltzman coordinated several of the mental health experts on site the day of the shootings and in the weeks that

⁴⁶ Peggy Lowe, interview.

⁴⁷ John Cloud and Andrew Goldstein, "Could He Have Done More?" *Time Magazine*, 20 December 1999, 48.

followed. “We put in place a safety net plan,”⁴⁸ Russell explained. The DA office worked to get all 2,000 staff, faculty and student body listed as primary victims, thus helping with the cost of mental health services and resources for those most affected by the tragedy. Russell explained that this was double the usual victim load in a crisis of this size. The school district made counseling services available to every student and had a counselor in every room when the students returned to school at Chatfield High School, all of which was explained to parents and the media in the Fact Sheet sent out daily (appendix A). Saltzman and Russell also made long-term arrangements for students, parents and staff, as well as additional resources from Jefferson County community agencies, metropolitan, state and federal agencies.

As time went on after the initial day of the crisis, Saltzman and Russell focused heavily on preservation of memorials and the mental health needs of victims and families. Saltzman’s staff arranged for condolences to victims and families of victims to be sent by way of U.S. mail and e-mail and for donations made to organizations to benefit victims. Russell was particularly in charge of the Community Healing Fund, the distribution of it, where it should and should not go.

Looking Back: What went right? What went wrong?

If one were to compare the steps and actions taken by the PIOs throughout the Columbine crisis to textbook theories and steps, it would seem that they had control over the situation and managed the crisis communication process well. However, when

⁴⁸ Pam Russell, interview.

looking at the small details and listening to the response of the media, the work of the PIOs did not go as smoothly as it appeared.

The first step taken to secure the scene of the crisis was a good one. No one foresaw the intensity and enormousness of the media coverage that the shootings would draw, and by setting perimeters around the physical site, as suggested by Alan Bernstein,⁴⁹ the PIOs gave themselves more room to breathe and get their jobs done. The media site at Clement Park, across the street from Columbine High School was also an important and successful move by the PIOs. Not only did this keep the media away from law enforcement officers and emergency personnel who tried to do their jobs amidst the chaos, it also allowed students exiting the building some time to calm down. Davis mentioned several times that he was constantly surrounded by the media and answered question after question. He was able to go to the media and they could not come to him. This kept the physical site free of unneeded, additional chaos.

With Davis over at Clement Park doing hourly briefings and interviews, he was not able to get over to the school to get new updates and information. Thus, the other PIOs, Russell in particular, could get the information she needed on site and then bring new updates to Davis over at Clement Park. The system worked well; however, Davis, being the main spokesperson, could not be the only voice. There were far too many questions and requests for one person to handle. The media were going to anyone and

⁴⁹ Alan B. Bernstein, 40-41.

everyone to get the answers they needed. Davis acknowledged the mistake made by himself and the other PIOs. Said Davis,

The hardest part and the best lesson learned is that you have to limit the number of people speaking to as few as possible—one if possible. However, one spokesperson in this situation was not enough.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, numerous people other than the PIOs talked to the press. Parents, students and even a man who called a local television station claiming to be a student caught inside the school, but turned out to be in Utah,⁵¹ were interviewed and often quoted without significant background information. There were so few people who had the information the media needed when they needed it. One reporter from the FOX television station in Denver commented that the kids became her best source of information. While she also credited the PIOs for getting plenty of information out there, she said that if “you had three or four kids saying the same thing, you knew it was true”⁵² and she used that information in her reports. This was not the case so much for newspaper reporters as it was for the television reporters. Both Kevin Vaughan from the *Rocky Mountain News* and Peggy Lowe from the *Denver Post* would have liked more information from the PIOs. Students rambling questionable facts were not good enough. Reporters like McKinley, though, did not have time to search and investigate as they were filming live throughout the entire first day and into the next couple of weeks.

⁵⁰ Steve Davis, interview.

⁵¹ Peggy Lowe, interview.

⁵² Carol McKinley, interview by author, telephone, 16 February 2000.

Regardless of who did interviews and talked to the media, Steve Davis was the most well-known and obvious authoritative spokesperson at the site. After two weeks of hourly briefings eventually broken down to three briefings a day, Davis made an announcement that he would be returning to his office and the briefings would occur if there was any breaking news. Come Monday morning, Davis arrived at the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office in Golden, CO, and found a mob of reporters waiting to speak to him. "It was definitely the worst day," Davis said. "It was such an overwhelming time. I had 321 pages on my pager that day, 50 e-mails per hour and about 50 voice mail messages per hour."⁵³ Russell, Saltzman and all of the reporters interviewed agreed that Davis was the man to speak to when it came to information about the Columbine shootings. Overall, Lowe, Vaughan and McKinley all raved about Davis' efforts through the entire Columbine crisis and commended him for keeping his cool in several testy situations. Saltzman and the school district, however, did not get the same kind of feedback from the media.

Russell commented during her interview that the "school district wasn't really talking much that first day,"⁵⁴ and she had to get Saltzman and the other PIOs together to connect and organize themselves. Reporters for the competing papers in the Denver area, Vaughan and Lowe, also mentioned the lack of information from the school district. The issue of interviews with school principal, Frank DeAngelis was a sore spot with many

⁵³ Steve Davis, interview.

⁵⁴ Pam Russell, interview.

reporters. Said Lowe, “They really protected him... they only allowed one-on-one interviews.”⁵⁵ Lowe wished Saltzman and her staff had been more open from the beginning of the crisis. Compared to Davis and his team at the Sheriff’s Office, Saltzman was not as helpful and willing to accommodate the needs of the media as she should have been in a crisis. Lowe said,

I’d give [the school district] a mixed grade. They’d call you back and give you what you wanted, but they tried to protect the image of the school district at a time when maybe they shouldn’t have.⁵⁶

Vaughan, from the *Rocky Mountain News* agreed that DeAngelis was a problem and the whole ordeal of getting interviews was “bothersome.”⁵⁷ Since the first two weeks after the shootings, Vaughan said that the Jefferson County school district “continues to selectively respond to things.”⁵⁸ The *Rocky Mountain News* uncovered a videotape, different from the videotape in the *Time* magazine article, made for a class by Klebold and Harris titled, “Kill the Jocks.” According to Vaughan, the school district lied and said that the video made by the killers was not for a school project. Like Lowe, Vaughan did not give Saltzman and the school district high marks.

Of the PIOs I interviewed, Saltzman was the most ambiguous about several topics I asked about during the interview. For instance, her response to my question regarding her protection of the school principal, DeAngelis, was that they looked at each request for

⁵⁵ Peggy Lowe, interview.

⁵⁶ Peggy Lowe, interview.

⁵⁷ Kevin Vaughan, interview.

⁵⁸ Kevin Vaughan, interview.

an interview individually and looked at what would help the healing process and a “return to normalcy.”⁵⁹ However, as Lowe pointed out, this was not the best time to hide behind excuses and protect one’s image. Saltzman and the rest of the school district’s actions affected the overall rating of their performance by the media.

As mentioned before, the reporters I interviewed raved about Davis and his response to the Columbine shootings, particularly on the day of the shootings and the two weeks that followed. Vaughan had a strong relationship with Davis before and after Columbine. Said Vaughan, “I witnessed Steve under the heat of hundreds of reporters and I give him a lot of credit for keeping his cool.”⁶⁰ The first release of a death toll at 25 by the sheriff did not disturb Vaughan, as it did other reporters. The number did turn out to be a mistake and Vaughan said that he recalls the sheriff saying an estimated 25 people are dead. Lowe and McKinley did not agree. McKinley used the death toll of 25 as factual information on the air immediately after the sheriff announced it and felt it deceived people. The *Denver Post*, the newspaper for which Lowe is a reporter, printed Davis’ exact words: ““I’ve heard numbers as high as 25” deaths, said Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone, adding that 17 were confirmed.”⁶¹ Speculation like that by Sheriff Stone or of any kind, is deadly in crisis communications, and while Davis and some

⁵⁹ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

⁶⁰ Kevin Vaughan, interview.

⁶¹ Mark Obmascik, “High School Massacre: Columbine bloodbath leaves up to 25 dead.”

reporters do not feel the mistake was critical, it had potential to cause the agencies undue embarrassment and loss of credibility.⁶²

Lowe acknowledged that it was Sheriff Stone who made the mistake of announcing the death toll at 25 when emergency personnel did not confirm it. While she agreed that Davis was great, she also said that he was “unaware of what the sheriff was doing.”⁶³ While Davis made himself very accessible and knowledgeable, reporters often prefer to speak directly to the person in charge, such as Sheriff Stone. Davis should have prepped the sheriff and perhaps, given him some media training before the Columbine crisis occurred. Public relations professionals stress the importance of putting the most effective person in front of the media during a crisis. Often times it is a good idea to send an individual who may have contact with the press to a professional media consultant for media training or to courses in public speaking.⁶⁴ Sheriff Stone and Davis’ credibility may have improved with a little media training. Overall, during the day of the shootings and the two weeks, Davis received high marks for his ability to keep the media informed and for controlling the information about the nature of the crime.

The very nature of the shootings initialized several relationships that unfortunately formed through the process of organizing, controlling and managing the

⁶² Laurence Barton, 9.

⁶³ Peggy Lowe, interview.

⁶⁴ Laurence Barton, 182.

Columbine crisis. It was rare that Marilyn Saltzman worked directly with Davis and Russell. Davis and Russell worked together often since their agencies typically overlap and cover the same area or jurisdictions. Each person walked into the situation with a different agenda and today, realizes that relationships are key to communicating one message and successfully controlling a crisis. As noted previously, the media assessed each “agency” separately. The sheriff’s office was informative and easy to work with; the school district was unapproachable and protective. While the PIOs attempted to work with one another and meet regularly each week at first, they did not last long and because of this, they did not portray a united front to the media. This is understandable due to the nature of the crisis and considering the rarity of the agencies all working together often. However, Davis, Saltzman and Russell said one of the greatest actions they took was to collaborate with each other as often as possible. Russell commented that it would have been nice to meet more often, also noting that she did not think that Davis “physically could have done it.”⁶⁵

Saltzman also talked about the weekly meetings and the positive results that came from working together. When asked about the working relationship with the other PIOs said Saltzman, “With a crisis of this magnitude there were some bumps in the road. We

⁶⁵ Pam Russell, interview.

were dealing with incredible situations and often had to make decisions on the spot.”⁶⁶ Saltzman then said later that she thought that “intergovernmental relations” did not go as well as they could have. While her responses did not coincide through our interview, it was obvious that Saltzman did come away from the first two weeks feeling a little uneasy with the lack of teamwork among the PIOs from the different agencies. Since the shootings, the PIOs formed a Jefferson County PIO group. It is an informal group that meets quarterly to discuss Columbine-related and other issues involving the several agencies. This is an obvious step in the right direction to improve a working relationship among agencies so that if a crisis of the Columbine nature were to happen again, the PIOs would recognize and know each other before arriving at the scene and would have a plan for working together.

Once the initial tasks of clearing the school of students, recovering bodies and beginning the criminal investigation was underway, the PIOs found that their plates were not cleared. A crisis is not over with that first day, but rather it lingers with more responsibilities for PIOs and other officials involved. For Davis, Saltzman and Russell, memorials, both the physical sites and the services and then the graduation that fell just one month after the shootings, became another crisis to manage.

⁶⁶ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

Memorials for the victims and Columbine High School Graduation

It was not long after the shootings that the PIOs, Saltzman and Russell in particular, began their work to coordinate memorial services and memorial sites for the Columbine victims. Event planning was only a small part of the larger picture that included visits from U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno two days after the shootings, Vice President Al Gore for the memorial service on April 26 and, finally, President and Mrs. Clinton a few days before graduation. Each visit drew masses of people and media yet again. Commencement for the Columbine High School seniors brought another media onslaught.

Some of Russell and Saltzman's responsibilities became as simple as keeping the snow and rain off the memorial items placed at Clement Park, across from the school grounds, and other nearby areas. In addition to the shootings being the largest and most difficult crisis experienced by anyone involved, Denver and surrounding cities like Littleton had one of the largest snowfalls for the month of April in years. Russell ordered tents to cover the memorials made by students, friends and the community. The snow was so heavy and piling on the tents that she had to clear the snow off the tops so that the tents would not cave in over the memorabilia.⁶⁷ Saltzman, recognizing the need for people to grieve, placed information on the district web site and in Fact Sheets sent out to

⁶⁷ Pam Russell, interview.

media and parents that explained the plan to preserve the memorials for some time. She then coordinated with Foothills Park and Recreation District, the Colorado State Historic Society and the Jefferson County Archivist, a plan to recover and remove the memorials from Clement Park and store certain items for remembrance.⁶⁸

Apart from the memorial service and the physical memorial sites formed by gifts and items of remembrance from the community, people around the world chose to memorialize the loss during the Columbine tragedy with monetary donations. Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas was one of several people involved in “administering the donations”⁶⁹ totaling over \$2 million. Russell explained that the decision of where the money would go and who would benefit from it was very difficult and involved a significant amount of planning and communicating with victims’ families. The families became a part of the decision-making process for the allocation of donations when the district attorney’s office came “under fire from some families for what they perceive[d] as delays in doling out the money and a lack of accountability.”⁷⁰ One of the major issues that the committee had to decide on was “who should be considered compensable victims and how much should they get.”⁷¹ Already, 38 victims identified

⁶⁸ Pam Russell, interview

⁶⁹ Lynn Bartels, “Jeffco DA discusses donations with victims: Thomas, others in charge of funds meet with families, ask for guidance on how to distribute \$2 million,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 27 May 1999, sec. A, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

by the sheriff's office as injured or who had received medical treatment on April 20, 1999, have received \$5000 each.

Russell said that much of the controversy revolved around the media's reporting of the issue and confusing facts. She said one reporter "in particular, really messed up on where the money was going."⁷² Russell chose not to reveal the reporter's name but mentioned that this only added to the heated controversy over the allocation of the donated money.

During and after the shootings at Columbine High School, Davis, Saltzman and Russell not only helped to organize memorials, but also significant arrivals of key political figures to Littleton, CO. All of the PIOs were involved to some degree in the planning and coordination of visits to Columbine by Janet Reno, Vice President Al Gore and President Clinton. Whether it was working with the guests directly, as Russell did, or just supplying a volunteer to help where needed, each agency offered its resources. Reno visited Jefferson County on April 23, just two days after the shootings. Because of the nature of her work, she met with the district attorney and law officials, while also saving time to meet with victims and their families. Reno's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease meant Russell also had to find a separate room for her to go to for periodic rests during her visit.⁷³ Reno was also scheduled to tour the Columbine High School but was unable when another bomb was found shortly before the scheduled time. District Attorney Dave

⁷² Pam Russell, interview.

⁷³ Ibid.

Thomas and Russell agreed that Reno's visit and words of condolence boosted morale in Jefferson County.

While Reno's visit included working with her people to coordinate certain sites she needed to see and people she would need to talk with, the Vice President and President's visits required more planning. Gore came for the memorial service on April 25, 1999. The planning of not only the service, but working with the Secret Service and security for the Vice President and then the crowd and media control was no small task. The memorial was set-up and run through the governor's office, but the school district and other agencies sent volunteers to help. The service took place at Columbine High School, near Clement Park. Surrounded by several small memorials set up by students, families and community members, more than double the estimated number of attendees gathered to mourn the loss of 12 students and one teacher. Because Colorado Governor Bill Owens's staff put on the memorial service, Saltzman, Davis and Russell had little to do with the media relations and organization. However, Saltzman explained that the school district did make a volunteer available to help out where help was needed.⁷⁴ Instead, the PIOs focused on the near future that brought a visit from the president and the graduation of the Columbine High School senior class of 1999.

President Clinton visited Littleton on May 20, 1999 for the one-month anniversary and again, arrangements were made for his speaking engagements with

⁷⁴ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

students, victims and families of victims in conjunction with the Secret Service. Again, the additional measures of coordinating events and security issues with the Secret Service became the responsibilities of the PIOs. The school board for Columbine High School invited the president to come to Littleton for the one-month anniversary of the tragedy. Jefferson County Schools Superintendent Jane Hammond said the president agreed to come because he “want[ed] the opportunity to show his concern in the least intrusive way and by people’s choice.”⁷⁵ Therefore, most of the president’s visits were not open to the media. Instead, the president and the first lady first met privately with the families of the victims at a local church. Later in the afternoon at 3:45 p.m., the president and his wife traveled to Dakota Ridge High School to meet and speak with Columbine students and faculty members. The school district invited community leaders and rescuers to attend, as well. Saltzman and her staff agreed to allow “limited media coverage” at the Dakota Ridge meeting, but the media were not permitted at the private meeting at the local church.⁷⁶

Following President and Mrs. Clinton’s visit to Littleton, the school district also organized a community forum for the same evening on May 20, 1999 at Leawood Elementary School, where several students were reunited with their parents on the tragic day last April. The topic, “Community Dialogue: Where Do We Go From Here?”

⁷⁵ Janet Bingham, “Clinton to meet privately with families, students,” *Denver Post*, 18 May 1999, sec. B, p. 03.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

featured a panel of “school district officials, mental health experts and leaders of parent and teacher groups.”⁷⁷ The goal was to open up a discussion about the Columbine massacre and the aftermath with the school officials and parents. Saltzman organized several of these types of discussions and panels for parents, students and the general community to voice their opinions and feelings about how things were handled during and after the crisis. Saltzman also made several one to three-hour-long presentations to various groups including the 1999 NSPRA conference attendees.⁷⁸ The idea behind the panel on May 20, 1999 after Clinton’s visit was to evaluate the tragedy at the one-month anniversary in hopes that people were ready to talk about it.

Just two days after Clinton’s visit, the PIOs, particularly Saltzman, were thrust back into intense planning and media relations in preparation for the Columbine High School graduation at Fiddler’s Green Amphitheatre on May 22, 1999. Because graduation is an event put on by the individual high school and the school district, Saltzman and her boss, Rick Kaufman, held the primary responsibility of media relations for the commencement and the arrangement for the masses of people expected to attend. Saltzman and Kaufman immediately agreed to pool the media for the graduation ceremony. Several requests from parents asked that media not be allowed to attend the ceremony at all. However, Saltzman knew the repercussions of excluding reporters would be huge. Students also expressed concern about the media’s presence at

⁷⁷ “Both Clintons to meet victims, kin,” *Denver Post*, 19 May 1999, sec. B, p. 02.

⁷⁸ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

graduation. Student Krissa Eggert said, “We don’t want any media there. We don’t want anyone except family.”⁷⁹ Eggert’s feelings stressed a common need for normalcy and privacy among students graduating.

To retain a sense of privacy, representatives of print, television and radio formed a pool allowed to attend graduation. The idea was that the journalists agreed to share the information they gathered with one another. Once the pool was formed, Saltzman set several ground rules. Each journalist was issued credentials for entrance to Fiddler’s Green. Said Saltzman, “It was tightly controlled,” and security was hired to prevent unauthorized press entry without the proper credentials. Because “some parents didn’t want any media at the graduation, we [the school district] compromised with a tight pool.”⁸⁰ The media was not only barred from talking to anyone inside the graduation area, but Saltzman also demanded that all helicopters had to stay two miles out from the graduation location.

Overall, graduation was a sad day and one left to the privacy of the Columbine High School community. Due to the minimal press allowed at the ceremony, the public shared a small glimpse of the ceremony. CNN provided a live television feed and a few other national and local television stations captured the commencement on video for later public viewing.

⁷⁹ Brian Weber, “Fear, hope fill graduation day for Columbine,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 16 May 1999, <http://InsideDenver.com/shooting/0516grad3.shtml>.

⁸⁰ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

Looking Back: What went right? What went wrong?

The transition from the first two weeks after the shootings at Columbine to the memorials and graduation was very short. It all blended together for the PIOs, who really had no break between the incidents. Columbine was every day. Davis' other cases at the sheriff's office, the hundreds of students at other schools in Saltzman's school district and Russell's various responsibilities at the district attorney's office were left untended as they tried to gain control over Columbine.

After the chaos of the first two weeks, the media died down a bit. The international reporters that camped outside Davis' office for interviews returned home and many national reporters left for other breaking news.⁸¹ All of the reporters interviewed identified the memorial service and graduation as significant and heavily covered stories, but there were no complaints about how the events were organized or how the PIOs responded and prepared. As a matter of fact, Lowe did not comment on the press pools at all. Vaughan explained that he expected the press pools but that some of the rules, he and his colleagues felt, were "overly nit-picky."⁸² The school district did not allow the reporters to talk to any of the families or students at graduation regardless of whether the family was willing to speak with the media. Vaughan explained that this rule

⁸¹ Steve Davis, interview.

⁸² Kevin Vaughan, interview.

developed after a “reporter from another paper tried to do an interview”⁸³ during graduation.

Other than Vaughan’s few remarks, the media really had little in the way of evaluative remarks on the memorial service or graduation compared to that of the PIOs response on the day of the shootings and two weeks out. This makes sense, however, when one looks at the organization among the PIOs for the events or small crises that erupted out of the Columbine shootings.

Time for preparation and planning of graduation was a blessing to Saltzman and her staff after feeling the pressure of making on-the-spot decisions on April 20, 1999. Saltzman was able to listen to the needs of the victims and their families, their requests for how graduation was to play out and also to the needs of the media. The professional decision was made to pool the press. Parents’ minds were put at ease and journalists, understanding of the strict guidelines and regulations to allow for private grievance and celebration for those graduating students and their families, got their story. Bernstein notes in his Emergency Public Relations Manual that press pooling “shows your emergency response is a professional one.”⁸⁴ Graduation therefore was more orderly and pleasant in terms of the public information response than it was on the day of the shootings.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Alan B. Bernstein, 136.

First Day Back at School in September 1999 and the Hochhalter Suicide

After the memorial services and graduation, Littleton County quieted down a bit. The phones continued to ring and Saltzman, Davis and Russell continued to keep Columbine on the top of their list of things to do. However, the pace had slowed and the media, particularly the national media, stayed away. The quiet did not last long, as the media were gearing up for the back-to-school Columbine stories and the PIOs worked on media relations for the big story, as well as the first opening of Columbine High School since the shootings.

Over the summer, the school became a tourist stop, as tour buses drove by the site. Meanwhile, Saltzman and other school district officials helped organize and coordinate school tours by the media and the families of the victims throughout the summer.⁸⁵ The summer is usually the time Saltzman's office catches up on "school publications, maps, back-to-school packets and other printed material."⁸⁶ That was not the case this summer. The media were not physically present, but their requests and requests for speakers and research information was constant.

With the interest and the hype slowly building over the summer months in anticipation of the Columbine students' return to school, Saltzman and her boss, Rick Kaufman, along with Russell and Davis organized a media summit on August 8, 1999.

⁸⁵ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

⁸⁶ Patrick O'Driscoll, "For media and survivors, it's Columbine—part 2," *USA Today*, 6 August 1999, sec. A, p. 4.

The first day of school was set for August 16, 1999. Despite the fact that 142 other schools in Jefferson County returned to school on the same day, Saltzman said that over 90 percent of the media relations she did was for Columbine.⁸⁷

The school district made the decision before the media summit to pool the media, similar to the way things worked for the graduation ceremony in May. Saltzman assigned a school district volunteer to each media person in the pool to answer his or her questions and be sure they followed the strict guidelines set.⁸⁸ The media could cover the event only, just like graduation, and they were “not allowed to conduct individual interviews of students or staff.”⁸⁹

The same week as the media summit, TV networks and reporter stand-ups set up and pitched their tents to wait for the important day. The “media area” was set in the park across the street from the school, much closer than Clement Park, where the media were stationed during the weeks after the shootings. Saltzman organized periodic press conferences throughout the first day back with staff, students and parents to talk about how the return to school at Columbine was going. The main concern for both Saltzman and the rest of the school district, as well as students was that the return to school at Columbine be as normal as possible. The *Rocky Mountain News* printed a story the day

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

after the first day of school quoting a brother and sister about their desire for normalcy.

Said Columbine High School senior, Barbara Schneider,

I want the day to be normal, but I know that normal is now different. Normal is expecting things like millions of media people, and 50 tour buses driving by and pointing at your school.⁹⁰

Once the students got past the first week, things did seem to calm down and they watched the media pack up and leave Columbine once again. For the PIOs and the reporters, business went on as usual. The PIOs played catch-up on their other responsibilities, while reporters found other stories to cover. The wounds would re-open once again, though, with the shocking suicide of Carla Hochhalter, the mother of Anne Marie Hochhalter, who was paralyzed during the attack on Columbine.

“It would calm down and then something else would happen,”⁹¹ said Davis referring to the suicide of Mrs. Hochhalter. But this “something else” took an emotional toll on the media and PIOs more so than many other incidents following the shootings. The suicide occurred about two months after students returned to school at Columbine on October 22, 1999. Hochhalter entered a pawnshop in Englewood, CO and while filling out paperwork for a gun purchase she was asked if she had any mental illnesses. She answered “no” and picked up the unloaded gun. With her back to the counter, she loaded the .38-caliber gun with her own bullets and “fired one into a wall and one into her

⁹⁰ Lynn Bartels, “Students aim for ‘normal’ first day back family strives to put tragedy of April 20 behind them as three teens return to columbine,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 17 August 1999, sec. A, p. 5.

⁹¹ Steve Davis, interview.

temple.”⁹² It was later discovered that Hochhalter battled acute depression and had been hospitalized since December. While the Hochhalter family and other Columbine victims grieved for the latest victim, the media and PIOs experienced a grief of their own.

The suicide offered a time of reflection and marked a point of realization that journalists and PIOs alike had broken maybe too many rules. McKinley, Denver FOX correspondent said that she did not really cover the Hochhalter suicide much but did comment on the media response to it overall. “We broke all the rules on this one,” she said. “I heard some reporters say that they don’t usually cover suicides or threats at schools, but because it happened in relation to Columbine, we were there.”⁹³ Davis agreed and said the same idea related to his work at the sheriff’s office. Anything that had a tie to Columbine, good or bad, took precedence over other work because it was of national interest—the nation, and at times the world was watching them.

The Hochhalter suicide had a more emotional impact on reporters, Lowe and Vaughan. Vaughan recalled coming back from the field after interviewing sources for an unrelated story when he heard the news: “I remember just slumping in my chair and thinking it’s never gonna end for some of these families.”⁹⁴ Lowe was equally devastated and explained that the suicide had a significant effect on the *Denver Post* staff. Said Lowe:

⁹² Lynn Bartels. “Mom had been hospitalized for depression Carol Hochhalter had struggles with her illness for three years,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 26 October 1999, sec. A, p. 4.

⁹³ Carol McKinley, interview.

⁹⁴ Kevin Vaughan, interview.

Hochhalter's suicide brought everything to a head. It was a very moving experience. There is a lot of guilt on our part about having to go back; we feel guilty about creating more pain.⁹⁵

The *Denver Post* backed off the Columbine stories a bit after the suicide for the sake of the victims and also for its own reporters.

When the media backed off after the suicide, Saltzman and the school district did, as well. The school district provided very little information to the media about the incident. They did, however, "work directly with families of the victims to let them know about this tragedy."⁹⁶ The tragedy was the turning point for all involved in the Columbine saga.

When Russell received a phone call about Mrs. Hochhalter's suicide, she immediately called her boss and the Victim Advocacy Center to set up additional support systems for families of the victims. Said Russell, "The adrenaline started pumping and we were right back in it."⁹⁷ Russell immediately made strides to make sure the families all knew of the incident by calling them before the media found out to hopefully minimize some of the trauma.⁹⁸ The Columbine tragedy continued and the victims and families were re-traumatized once more.

⁹⁵ Peggy Lowe, interview.

⁹⁶ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

⁹⁷ Pam Russell, interview.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Looking Back: What went right? What went wrong?

Unlike the initial response to the shootings, the planning of graduation and the first day of school, the PIOs did not have to plan for the Hochhalter suicide. It was a very small crisis and for the most part, they let it play out with little media coverage. The school district answered minimal media requests for information and the district attorney's office and the sheriff's office were hardly involved. The most significant lesson learned from the suicide of Mrs. Hochhalter was that everyone needed to back off from a story that was run into the ground time and again. As each PIO and reporter said, if something was linked to Columbine, it was a big story and required the attention of PIOs. Lowe, McKinley and Vaughan all expressed an emotional toll that the suicide took on themselves and the media in general and had no complaints about the way the PIOs handled, or rather, did not handle the incident. It needed no response.

The first day back at school on August 17, 1999, did spark some criticism, though. Whether it was students or the PIOs, the general feeling was that people were tired of the media and the constant watch over Columbine High School. Normalcy was the goal for Saltzman and the rest of the school district officials when they drew up boundaries and guidelines for the media to follow.

The preparations for the return to school in the fall closely follow the guidelines PR professionals suggest during a crisis. Different, though, from a typical crisis, Saltzman was able to prepare for the first day back at school because she had an idea of what to expect. As mentioned in the last section, Saltzman and her boss held a media

summit before the first day of school to set some guidelines for the media. Perimeters were set around the school, as Bernstein suggests in his *Emergency Public Relations Manual*, thus allowing the PIOs to have control over who enters the school grounds. No tours were given on the first day in order to keep reporters from trying to talk to students and staff. Saltzman also utilized press pooling, as she also used for the Columbine graduation just a few months prior.

The benefits of press pooling in this particular case are many for the PIOs and for the students. The students, already tired of the media and their presence at school, did not have to face thousands of reporters on their way in and out of school. Saltzman and her co-workers could more easily manage news by appointing a volunteer from the school district to each reporter to answer questions and make sure each one followed the guidelines set. Bernstein, in his manual, explains that often journalists appreciate and “respect professionalism in others as they do in their own field.”⁹⁹ They will willingly abide by guidelines set if they fairly balance their needs with the need to responsibly control an emergency or crisis situation. The reporters also appreciate advance notice of the press pool so that they can adequately chose the correct person to represent their newspaper or station in the pool. Saltzman was able to give them a one-week notice at the media summit so that they had ample time to prepare.¹⁰⁰ The reporters interviewed had no complaints about the organization of the event. Everyone anticipated some

⁹⁹ Alan B. Bernstein, 136.

¹⁰⁰ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

structure, and several reporters expressed grief at having to tell the story all over again. Said Saltzman, “During the coverage of the first day of school, every single local medium said, “I don’t want to be here, I’m so sorry.””¹⁰¹ Vaughan of the *Rocky Mountain News* said that he and several other print reporters felt that the “public officials, especially with the school district, were more interested in television coverage than newspaper or magazine coverage.” Overall, he said he “generally took it in stride.”¹⁰² Vaughan also mentioned an area set up by PIOs where anyone that wanted to talk to reporters could come and meet with them. Reporters appreciated the effort; however, the area did not get much use as it was not “real well-received by that time.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the day went as predicted, the media did their job, as did Saltzman, and the day went smoothly.

The duties to control the information and the media presence at Columbine High School on the first day back at school fell into Saltzman’s jurisdiction. Davis, Russell and Saltzman separately mentioned several times that each PIO really stuck to his or her job-related duties because of the nature of each agency’s jurisdiction and responsibilities. In some cases, the PIOs and their staff did not agree with those of another agency. Saltzman identified teamwork and learning to work with the other agencies in times of emergencies as an area that needed improving after the Columbine crisis. The separateness of each of the three primary agencies involved, continued to

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Kevin Vaughan, interview.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

show through each of the smaller crisis or incidents that followed the initial shootings, like the first day back at school.

The Videotapes and *Time* Magazine Controversy

The most controversial and significant crisis that occurred after the Columbine shootings was the sheriff's release of the confidential suicide videotapes of Columbine High School killers, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, to *Time* magazine. *Time* magazine put out its December 20, 1999, issue with a 32-page cover story on the motivation of the killers with footage and quotes from the videotapes made by the killers one month before the massacre. In the four to six weeks before the magazine hit the newsstands, the local media fought both in and out of court to see the tapes. However, the Jefferson County Sheriff's department kept the tapes private for two reasons: "The ongoing investigation into the April 20 massacre, specifically whether anyone knew of Harris and Klebold's plans, and the impact the tapes will have on the community's emotional well-being."¹⁰⁴ The sheriff never expected, though, that the *Time* magazine reporter, Tim Roche, would use footage from the videotapes in his story.

According to Davis, Tim Roche of *Time* magazine called him and asked about viewing the tapes months before the story came out. Davis told Roche that the sheriff's office would not be doing a story on the tapes but that he would double check with the sheriff. Davis, at that point, decided he, Sheriff Stone and Undersheriff Dunaway needed to meet to discuss *Time* magazine's request and other requests to view the tapes and when they did, it was agreed that there would definitely be no story on the videotapes and they would remain private from the public. Davis then called Roche back and told him the

¹⁰⁴ Chronis and Pankratz, "Prosecutor, schools chief blast sheriff's officials."

news. “I could tell he was a little annoyed,”¹⁰⁵ Davis said, but he was sure the issue was over. But it was not over and Roche did not give up.

In the first few weeks of December, Davis was out of town in Florida, teaching a class. Roche started calling the sheriff’s office again but this time he “went around me [Davis] to the undersheriff.”¹⁰⁶ Roche eventually convinced the undersheriff to allow him to see the videotapes that local media and families were not permitted to see. When the undersheriff spoke with Davis in Florida and told him of his decision, Davis did not approve and felt they should stick to their original decision. Nevertheless, said Davis, “He’s the boss and I said okay.”

When the public found out that the sheriff’s office released the tape, they were outraged. The sheriff and undersheriff claimed that they had an agreement with the *Time* reporter that “the contents of the tapes would not be made public.”¹⁰⁷ The Jefferson County Attorney Dave Thomas and the Superintendent Jane Hammond both immediately issued statements at a news conference held the afternoon the public found out about the release of the tapes. Thomas told the press that he was not consulted at all about the release of the tape and it came “as a complete surprise”¹⁰⁸ to him. Hammond spoke for the school district and said, “We were disappointed in the videotapes being released. We don’t believe it is in the best interest of the families, students or staff. This is a very sad

¹⁰⁵ Steve Davis, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Chronis and Pankratz, “Prosecutor, schools chief blast sheriff’s officials.”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

day.”¹⁰⁹ DeAngelis, Columbine High School principal, expressed the same disappointment and surprise. He was interviewed by *Time* magazine for the article and had understood that the article was going to focus on how Columbine was healing. DeAngelis felt that the article worked against his efforts to keep the Columbine community together. He told *Denver Post* reporters: “We’re in the process of healing—we take one step forward, and now this has taken two giant steps back.”¹¹⁰ Both school officials and the district attorney spoke of the poor timing of the article, hitting the newsstands amidst the holiday season.

Once parents and the local media learned of the release of the videotapes, a viewing for the victim’s parents was set up to watch a shortened version of the tapes after the local media watched them. Parents were outraged not only that *Time* magazine saw the tapes, but also that the local media were allowed to view them after the article was printed. Connie Michalik, whose son was paralyzed during the shootings, told *Denver Post* reporters that she does not buy the sheriff’s story. Said Michalik, “You don’t leak things like that to the media and not expect it to go anyplace.”¹¹¹ Several parents asked the sheriff’s department not to release the tapes to the public after a viewing by local media and parents. The mother of Rachel Scott, a Columbine victim, claimed her daughter’s name was mentioned by Harris and Klebold in the videotapes and “called for

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Marilyn Robinson and Peter Chronis, “A tempest over tapes: Outrage greets Jeffco sheriff’s video release,” *Denver Post*, 14 December 1999, sec. A, p. 01.

Stone's resignation."¹¹² Other parents agreed with Scott when she said, "He has wounded the victims of the Columbine tragedy over and over again."¹¹³ Stone said he would not resign, but did take full responsibility for the release of the tapes. At a news conference on Tuesday, December 14, said Stone:

My mistake in this thing was not being able to properly evaluate the character and integrity of somebody I thought was a top-notch national journalist. (He) can run back to New York, and we've got to pick up the pieces.¹¹⁴

After addressing the angry parents, Stone also addressed the local reporters and had to explain how the tapes fell into the hands of the national magazine.

The sheriff's department created and worked alone through this crisis. Davis was out of town and Wayne Holverson took over responsibilities as spokesperson for the sheriff's office. Holverson told the press that both the sheriff's office and *Time* magazine share the fault in the release of the tapes. Said Holverson, "It's tragic for the families this was released the way it was. That was never the intent in allowing the reporter to view what he viewed."¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, the school district attempted to calm and reassure parents that school officials were misled on the intent of the article.

Jane Hammond not only appeared at a news conference on Monday, December 13, 1999, when the news of the *Time* magazine article broke, but Saltzman prepared a

¹¹² Holly Kurtz, "Families: Keep school killers' tapes private," *Rocky Mountain News*, 21 December 1999, sec. A, p. 4.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Charley Able and Kevin Vaughan, "Sheriff: 'The buck stops here,'" *Rocky Mountain News*, 15 December 1999, <http://InsideDenver.com/shooting/1215ston1.shtml>.

¹¹⁵ Robinson and Chronis, "A tempest over tapes: Outrage greets Jeffco sheriff's video release."

letter signed by Hammond (appendix C) to go home with Columbine High School students about the issues surrounding the videotapes. The following is an excerpt from Hammond's letter:

We cooperated with one of the correspondents and a photographer from *Time* magazine in the development of an article about Columbine High School because we believed it was going to focus on how the school and community have begun the healing process. *Time* reporters met with administrators, students and staff to talk about the positive things happening at Columbine. Our hope was that this holiday season article would be a catalyst for further healing. Unfortunately for the most part, the positive activities were not included in the magazine.

Hammond also explained that the school district asked the sheriff's department to keep any videotapes related to the Columbine tragedy confidential and private in order to protect the community.

While the controversy over the videotapes died down after a month or so, parents are still angry with the sheriff and his choice to show the tapes to *Time* magazine and then to the local media. This crisis was another where the three PIOs and their agencies did not see eye to eye and thus, worked against one another.

Looking Back: What went right? What went wrong?

Whether it was the district attorney, the school superintendent, Saltzman, reporters or the sheriff himself, everyone agreed that releasing the tapes was a mistake. Just when things seemed calm and the healing process was gaining momentum, another crisis erupted and the PIOs transformed back into emergency mode once again. This time, however, Saltzman and Russell did not work with Davis. Any sort of unity that was

established through the duration of the Columbine crisis fell apart here, as all fingers were pointed at the sheriff's office.

When asked if more media training may have helped the sheriff throughout the Columbine tragedy and especially in dealing with the *Time* magazine reporter, Tim Roche, Davis simply could only say "maybe."¹¹⁶ The sheriff's department, "even the boss, looks back on that as a poor decision."¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, the past cannot be repeated and the school district and the district attorney's office had to pick up the pieces. Davis explained that the release of the videotapes created several problems with the local media and with the parents of victims and calls this mini-crisis "the one incident that bruised the whole department."¹¹⁸ Despite the several apologies and the sheriff's confession, Saltzman, Russell and the reporters interviewed all agreed that the release of the tapes was "like a slap in the face to [everyone]."¹¹⁹

Once Saltzman found out about the tapes, she immediately prepared materials, such as the letter mentioned previously from the superintendent of schools, for parents, students and for the local media.¹²⁰ Saltzman and the school district felt they needed to explain their position on the controversy over the tapes, especially since *Time* magazine interviewed the principal and some staff and students for the article. In addition to

¹¹⁶ Steve Davis, interview.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Carol McKinley, interview.

¹²⁰ Marilyn Saltzman, interview.

written material, Saltzman also used voice-mail messages to the parents of the victims and the news conference at which Jane Hammond, the superintendent, verified the school district's anger with the sheriff's department.

Similar to the school district, Russell and the rest of the staff at the district attorney's office were "baffled" and upset over the videotapes. Saltzman, Hammond and Russell all mentioned disbelief that after it was agreed that the tapes would remain confidential, the sheriff went ahead and released them. In his *Emergency Public Relations Manual*, Bernstein explains that addressing several audiences such as the media, the victims, parents of the victims and the community, in the case of Columbine, it was more than one spokesperson can handle.¹²¹ Saltzman, Russell and Davis experienced this concept first-hand during the first few weeks after the shootings and since then, brought their agencies together to provide more effective information. With a network of PIOs in place long before the videotape incident, it is surprising that the school district, district attorney's office and the sheriff's department could not work together to get one story across. Instead, the agencies worked against one another and allowed their audiences to place blame on one agency over another.

¹²¹ Alan B. Bernstein, 97.

The videotapes not only weakened a unified PIO effort by the school district, sheriff's office and district attorney's office, but it also weakened the local media relations for the sheriff's office, specifically. The incident was particularly a sore spot with Vaughan, who covered the videotape story for the *Rocky Mountain News*. He worked with and talked to all the same people that the *Time* reporters worked with, but it was Vaughan who was continuously denied access to the tapes. Vaughan felt that the sheriff's office showed a significant amount of bias toward the national media. Said Vaughan, "The local reporters are here, they're a part of the community and we got shut out."¹²² On Sunday, December 12, 1999, when Vaughan found out that *Time* magazine saw the tapes, the *Rocky Mountain News* demanded to see the tapes, as well. So, later that afternoon Vaughan and several other reporters watched the tape and thus, the *Rocky Mountain News* was the first local paper to write and print stories on the tapes on Monday before everyone else saw them.¹²³

Vaughan said he still has not resolved the videotape issue in his mind. McKinley, however, was not as upset over the issue. She agreed that she was angry that the sheriff allowed *Time* magazine to see the tapes, and she suggested that there perhaps be "better communication between him [the sheriff] and his PIOs."¹²⁴ McKinley felt that had Davis

¹²² Kevin Vaughan, interview.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Carol McKinley, interview.

and the other spokespeople for the sheriff's department known what was going on, the crisis may never have occurred. Lowe of the *Denver Post*, was also upset, but showed more concern for the students and the parents of the victims because they had to "re-live their kids deaths all over again."¹²⁵ Lowe also pointed out that the sheriff's office neglected to realize time and again that what they say and do does deeply affect the victims.

While the PIOs all mentioned a concerted effort to work together and unite through the Columbine crises, their efforts fell by the wayside in this crisis. The sheriff and his undersheriff's mistake literally pitted the school district, the district attorney's office, the parents of the victims and the local media against the sheriff's department. It took some time for everyone to forgive and forget. Even months later however, reporters still mention the videotape incident and how betrayed they felt as local media and members of the community. As Davis called it, this was one mistake that "really bruised the [sheriff's] department."¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Peggy Lowe, interview.

¹²⁶ Steve Davis, interview.

Looking Ahead: The one-year anniversary of the Columbine High School Shootings

During the process of writing this report, the one-year anniversary of the Columbine shootings has come and gone. While this report does not cover the planning and the results of the PIO response to the anniversary due to time restraints, it is important to include a brief description of the initial planning stages for the PIOs, as well as plans for the media coverage, as most of the subjects interviewed mentioned their planning efforts in the interviews.

Each of the reporters interviewed came right out and said that their respective medium would cover the one-year anniversary of the Columbine Shootings heavily. Editors and reporters started planning for how they would cover the anniversary back in January. Vaughan explained that the *Rocky Mountain News* coverage of the April 20 tragedy was different than most papers in that they really focused on the victims rather than the killers.¹²⁷ In January, Vaughan predicted that his newspaper would take the same approach when covering the anniversary. The *Rocky Mountain News* also contacted community reporters in the cities where school shootings previously occurred during the first two weeks after April 20 for story ideas and would do the same for the anniversary.¹²⁸

Lowe said the *Denver Post* would definitely cover the anniversary. Lowe was assigned to cover Dylan Klebold and his family after the shootings. The *Denver Post*,

¹²⁷ Kevin Vaughan, interview.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

unlike its cross-town rival the *Rocky Mountain News*, did cover the victims and assigned specific reporters to cover the families of both killers. While Lowe was not positive on how they would cover the anniversary, she did say that she and several other reporters consistently felt guilty when they had to re-open the wounds of the victims and their families and that the anniversary would be difficult to cover.¹²⁹

Saltzman started planning for the one-year anniversary back before January, as well. She, too, consulted other school districts that dealt with school shootings of a similar nature to find out how they handled their anniversaries. As recently as the beginning of March, the school district made a schedule of one-year observances available on its Web site. "A Time to Remember, A Time to Hope" will be the theme for the anniversary and regularly scheduled classes will be cancelled on April 20, 2000. The anniversary events spanned over one week, beginning Sunday, April 16, 2000 with the Columbine Memorial 5K Run and Walk. On Thursday, April 20, 2000, an assembly for the students, a "Community Remembrance" in Clement Park for students and families, were closed to the public. A candlelight vigil was held in the Clement Park Amphitheater that same evening. The events at Columbine High School for the students and the community residents will not be open to the public nor the media. Saltzman and the

¹²⁹ Peggy Lowe, interview.

other PIOs met several times to discuss the ground rules for the media coverage and held a media summit similar to the one for the back-to-school coverage a few weeks before the anniversary.¹³⁰

Around the same time as the anniversary, the sheriff's department was expected to release their final report describing Colorado's largest criminal investigation. Estimated to come out in January, the sheriff postponed the final report until later in the year. Davis anticipates intense media requests and inquiries when the report does finally come out.¹³¹

Slowly, the community of Littleton, CO, is returning to some sense of normalcy and Saltzman, Russell and Davis are seeing a lot of each other in their meetings to control and manage the Columbine information flow. All three are hoping for some downtime and a decrease in the Columbine inquiries and phone calls once the one-year anniversary passes.

¹³⁰ Saltzman, interview.

¹³¹ Steve Davis, interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

A crisis is never easy for public information officers. No matter how small or large, it can involve long hours at the office, phone calls late into the night, disagreements with the media and disagreements with one another. Saltzman, Russell and Davis experienced all these things and more. The Columbine High School crisis was of a magnitude never experienced by any of the PIOs involved and one they would rather not deal with again.

Different from PIOs, journalists live for big stories like natural disasters and crises. They do not live for stories like the Columbine shootings, though. The emotional toll, the long hours and the fact that this was “kids killing kids”¹³² made the Columbine crisis hard for even the media to handle. That aside, however, a crisis is still a crisis and it involved effective communication and dissemination of important information to the appropriate audiences. For the Jefferson County agencies managing the crisis and their PIOs, this meant coming together, working together and cooperating so that the crisis was controlled effectively. This also meant that compromise, sharing of information and speaking with one voice was essential.

Speaking and acting with one voice is common practice for all public relations professionals when faced with a crisis. In the case of a previous school shooting at

¹³² Carol McKinley, interview.

Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, in May of 1998, all of the PIOs involved from the local hospitals to the Springfield school district worked together. Said Mike Moskovitz, communications specialist for Lane County, of his work on the Thurston High School shootings:

What made this unique is that it's the first time in a crisis situation where there was so much cooperation among agencies, where each agency worked together for a central purpose, to look after the community as a whole. From that point on, all of us worked together.¹³³

While the team effort was successful in other school shooting scenarios, Columbine's tragedy caused several bumps in the road for the PIOs as they responded to the crisis and the small crises that followed. As a result of three key incidents that occurred both during and after the shootings, the PIOs presented a disjointed public information response to the Columbine shootings in that each agency seemed to have its own agenda.

Beginning with the first day when the sheriff estimated the death toll in front of television cameras, the school district would pick up the pieces. Worried and upset parents flooded the phone lines with fear that their child might have been among the 25 dead. One of the many rules of media relations during a crisis is to release information that has been verified.

When Saltzman and the school district would not permit interviews with the principal of Columbine High School the first few days after the shootings, the media

¹³³ Andi Stein, 9.

flocked to Davis and the sheriff's department to the point that Davis gave briefings every hour during the first few days without a break between each one. To avoid the media or to try and cover things up during a crisis shows poor public relations and crisis communications practice according to professionals in the field.

Finally, the sheriff's release of the videotapes magnified the lack of communication among the three agencies. When the district attorney and the superintendent of the Jefferson County public schools appeared together in a joint news conference to blast the sheriff and his department for the release of the tape, it was all too clear that the PIOs in the sheriff's office had not done their job. One reporter suggested more media training and another suggested keeping the sheriff and his staff away from the press altogether. Either way, in a crisis situation, there should be one spokesperson and all media inquiries and requests should go through him. Davis was the spokesperson to begin with and the sheriff lacked the media savvy to step in and take Davis' place.

These several mistakes led to scrutiny of the public information response by both the media and the community. Within each of these situations, the PIOs proved that there was a lack of communication among themselves. The common mistakes of emergency or crisis communications, such as faulty statistics, putting the wrong people in front of the reporters and hiding from the media altogether, may have been avoided had the three agencies made more of an effort to work together. It is important to note, however, that when interviewed, the PIOs talked of their lack of teamwork and since then, have met

quite regularly to plan for the one-year anniversary and crisis prevention for the future.

No one denied that mistakes were made during the Columbine shootings.

To focus only on their mistakes though, and not mention the successes of the public information response would not do Saltzman, Russell and Davis any justice. The amount of information they were able to produce and disseminate during the day of the shootings and in the two weeks that followed impressed not only the journalists, but also the PIOs themselves. The dedication of Saltzman, Russell and Davis was obvious as they each put in 20-22-hour days and lived at Columbine for months after April 20. From the hourly media briefings to the daily fact sheets, the media, parents and the world had any information they could possibly need. The school district's use of their Web site, the telephone hotline and the extensive command center kept the PIOs and their staff organized and on top of breaking information. The PIOs' success stemmed beyond the first few weeks of the Columbine crisis, however, and continued into the smaller crises that followed.

If it was possible to plan for and anticipate the problems associated with a crisis, the Columbine PIOs proved that they could successfully handle media relations and crisis management. The memorial services, the disbursement of the monetary donations and gifts and the organization of the graduation ceremony were flawless. The PIOs kept the students, staff and families at the forefront of their concerns and while the media would have preferred more access to these events, they were very understanding and respecting of the press pools and the rules.

As the Columbine tragedy wraps up one year, Saltzman, Russell and Davis are looking forward to some quiet time. While there has not been a joint form of evaluation of the PIO response conducted by the three agencies yet, all three PIOs anticipate planning something soon. Since the shooting, there has not been a spare moment to stop and reflect on what happened and what was done to control the crisis because there was something new every couple of months. If the lesson learned was not about the importance of teamwork and presenting a unified front, then it was that a crisis does not just end the same day it begins. Instead, it lingers and requires more and more work and energy from public information officers. Particularly in the case of school shootings of the magnitude that Columbine was, preparation for the unexpected is what crisis communication is all about. Saltzman, Russell and Davis will be the first to admit that they never could have planned for what took place, and it was a learning experience in crisis communications and management for all involved.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE FACT SHEET – COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL

Fact Sheet

Columbine High School

Update for May 2, 1999 (released 10:30 a.m.)

Parent Information Line for Additional Information: 982-9990

There will be daily recorded updates on the hotline number through Friday, May 7.

Beginning Saturday, May 1, Phone Calls to Columbine will reach a voice mail message directing callers to Chatfield Senior High School (303-982-3670) with three options: Press one for Chatfield Senior High; press 2 for Columbine Bulletin Board; press 3 for a school staff member.

Columbine Students and Staff Tickets to Red Rocks Ceremony

Columbine students and staff still needing tickets to the remembrance ceremony at Red Rocks amphitheater can pick up their tickets today (Sunday) at the entrance to the Red Rocks amphitheater starting at 10:00 a.m. They will need to present their school ID to receive the tickets.

Personal Effects of Columbine Students

Personal effects of Columbine students will not be released until the end of the school year, according to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. A number of arrangements have been made to provide students with replacement materials. The Jefferson County Public Schools wants to thank these organizations for their donations: WalMart at Wadsworth and Quincy provided school supplies for Columbine students. Lenscrafters at the Southwest Plaza store will provide glasses (frames and lenses). Some frames are free. Other frames will be available at a \$75 discount. One-hour turnaround will be provided. Eye exams will be provided free if needed. (Brittany and Diane are coordinating program.) The Department of Motor Vehicles is providing replacement drivers licenses at no cost.

False Bomb Threats Are a Serious Offense

Parents are urged to talk to their children about the seriousness of making false bomb threats, both verbally and in the form of fake bombs. The school district and law enforcement are taking all threats and incidents extremely seriously. *Law enforcement will investigate all incidents, and will charge the person or persons responsible for these kinds of threats to the full extent of the law.* We need your assistance as we try to keep our schools safe and return to our mission of teaching and learning.

Hospital Update

As of Sunday morning three students are listed in fair condition, two students are in serious but stable condition. The rest of the injured students have been released and are now at home.

Students Initiate "I Will" Pledge

Green Mountain High school sociology students are spearheading a new campaign called the "I Will" campaign, originally created by students at Hillsboro High School in Nashville, Tennessee. The "I Will" pledge is a way for students to actively support nonviolence in schools by taking a

pledge to be part of the solution to conflicts, eliminate taunting from behavior, be more sensitive to others, and set a good example for others.

Columbine Class Schedule Beginning May 3

Classes for Columbine students will resume at Chatfield High School, 7227 South Simms Street on Monday, May 3. Classes resume for Columbine students in the afternoon. They will share the Chatfield high school building. Chatfield students will attend classes in the morning from 7 am. – 12:10 p.m. There will be seven periods for each group of high school students. The Columbine shift starts at 12:50 p.m. with a dismissal at 6:00 p.m. Periods are 40 minutes long with a 5-minute passing period. Snacks will be available daily.

Additional school security personnel will be at the school. The campus will be closed, meaning that students will not be able to leave and reenter the school building after the school day begins. Students participating in athletic events will be allowed to reenter the school campus (not the school building). Media will not be allowed on the school grounds. A strictly enforced perimeter will be maintained to allow students to go to classes undisturbed. Only cars with Columbine or Chatfield parking permits are being permitted in the Chatfield parking lot; other vehicles will be ticketed and towed.

Students without parking permits may park on the street or surrounding neighborhood. Because of the limited parking on Simms Street, permit only parking spaces will be open to students and staff, although no blocking of fire hydrants and entrances/exits will be allowed. However, all students and staff are strongly encouraged to car pool for the remainder of the year.

A bus schedule is available on the district's web site at <http://jeffco.k12.co.us>.

As in all Jeffco Schools, Columbine students will need to have ID's to enter the school. However during this transition week, all students will be accommodated. The school will work with students to replace lost or missing ID's as necessary.

Local businesses are asked to be flexible with students' schedules. Many students who have afternoon and evening jobs may need to change their work schedules. Business cooperation during this transition period is appreciated.

Media Parking Around Chatfield High School, May 3, 1998

No media will be allowed on the campus of Chatfield High School. The Jeffco Sheriff's Department has arranged for media trucks to park in the merge lane on the east side of Simms Street north of Fremont no earlier than 5 a.m. Monday, May 3.

Counseling for Columbine Students

Counseling will be available on an individual basis for every Columbine student as the need arises and as requested. A counselor will also be available in every room. There will also be a "safe" room for students to go to. An all-school assembly will be held on Monday. Long-term counseling support will be available to students, parents and staff, and additional resources are available from Jefferson County community agencies and individuals, as well as metropolitan area, state and federal agencies.

Web Page Offers Updates on Columbine

Jefferson County Public Schools is posting messages of support from around the world and regular updates on school schedules and information at <http://jeffco.k12.co.us>. This page is updated throughout the day.

Community members are encouraged to take advantage of a **Columbine discussion group**—a chat room that allows people from throughout Jefferson County to communicate with the world about the tragedy at Columbine.

Web visitors may also use a **special e-mail link** for people to send condolences, offer their prose, poetry, or share stories. The district has received thousands of messages that are currently being read by volunteers. Many of the messages will be used for a Columbine Memorial page.

Columbine Library Closed

The Columbine Library branch of the Jeffco Public Library is being used as the crisis communication center and will be closed to the public through the end of the week.

Columbine Graduation

The Columbine High School graduation will go on as scheduled: 10 a.m. on May 22 at Fiddler's Green.

Revisions to Conduct Code

The administration of the Jefferson County Schools Monday notified students and parents of a change in the district's code of conduct. In a letter to parents, the school district said, "A primary focus of Jefferson County Schools is to provide a safe and secure learning environment for all students. ... **Students will not be permitted to wear black trench coats or dusters** ... on district provided transportation, in any school building, on school grounds or at school-sponsored events."

Prayer Walk

Parents will hold a prayer walk for Chatfield and Columbine students at 6 a.m. Monday, May 3. The parents will walk around the school and pray for healing, safety and comfort as students return to school.

Free Concert May 4 in Honor of Columbine High

The Cherry Creek Chorale and The Chamber Orchestra of the West, in cooperation with Bethany Lutheran Church and the Musician's Performance Trust Fund of the Denver Musician's Association will present a Memorial Concert, *Remembering Columbine: The Faure Requiem*. The concert will be presented at 7:30 p.m., Tuesday, May 4 in the Sanctuary of Bethany Lutheran Church, 4500 E. Hampden Ave. (SW corner of Hampden and Dahlia just west of I-25.) Admission is free and open to the public. The concert is given as an offering of love and support from these area musicians. For further information, please call the Cherry Creek Chorale at 303-789-5920. We cannot arrange for special seating. If callers have a special request, they should contact the Jefferson Foundation at 303-982-2211.

Preservation of Clement Park Memorial Items

There has been an incredible outpouring of memorial items placed at Clement Park commemorating the Columbine High School tragedy. The District recognizes the need for people to continue to come to Clement Park and grieve for the victims as well as leave memorial

items. We also recognize the need to develop a sensitive plan for the preservation of these memorial items.

There are eight memorial areas that will be kept intact for an estimated two weeks. During the inclement weather, efforts will be made to protect items that could incur damage. The sheer magnitude of the memorial items will not allow us to protect everything from the elements. The Foothills Park and Recreation District is targeting the week of May 10 to begin active recovery of memorial items, and other aspects of park restoration. Removal and storage of some items may begin as early as this week if weather becomes a problem. A small collection of memorial items will be maintained in the park throughout the summer.

Foothills has solicited the assistance of the Colorado State Historic Society and the Jefferson County Archivist. Recovery and removal efforts will also be coordinated with Jefferson County R-1 Schools and Jefferson County officials.

Permanent Memorial for Columbine High School

Jefferson County and District officials announced plans to initiate the process for the creation of a permanent memorial. A Columbine High School Memorial Committee will be formed within the next several weeks to coordinate planning efforts and contributions, choose an appropriate location within the park, design the memorial, coordinate construction, and plan a dedication. Funding contributions for the memorial can be directed to:

The Foothills Foundation
Columbine High Memorial Fund
P.O. Box 621788
Littleton, Colorado 80162-1788
Attn: Jean Naylor, Treasurer

The memorial steering committee is planned to include appointed representatives from Columbine High School students, faculty, parents, and victims' families. This committee will coordinate their efforts with the Columbine area community and will seek public input into the design process. No specific plans for location, design, or a dedication date have been developed. (See attached Operation Plan)

Free Driver's License Replacements

The Colorado Department of Motor Vehicles is offering students and staff members from Columbine High School free replacements of their drivers' licenses. People who had to leave purses, briefcases and other personal effects in Columbine High School will be able to visit the driver's license booth at Southwest Plaza in Littleton (8501 W. Bowles Ave.) or the Driver's License Bureau, 3265 S. Wadsworth, during regular business hours. The bureau on Wadsworth is not open Mondays. Individuals will need to give the Motor Vehicle Department their name and social security number.

How Community Members and Others Can Help

❖ Condolences

Expressions of condolence (cards, notes, etc.) for the Columbine High School community may be sent by e-mail (calline@jeffco.k12.co.us) or U.S. mail:

Messages for Columbine
 Communications Services
 Jefferson County Public Schools
 P.O. Box 4001
 Golden, CO 80401-0001

❖ **Donations**

The staff and students of Jefferson County Public Schools and, particularly Columbine High School, are overwhelmed by the generosity of our local, state and national communities. At this time, we suggest that you consider monetary donations, rather than sending any gifts.

Several organizations have set up funds to benefit the victims. Donations may be sent to:

Columbine High School Assistance Fund
 Colorado High School Activities Board
 14855 East 2nd Avenue
 Aurora, CO 80011

OR

Columbine High School Memorial Fund
 Any U.S. Bank outlet

OR

JCEA – Christa McAuliffe Excellence Scholarship Fund
 Jefferson County Education Association
 1050 Wadsworth Blvd.
 Lakewood, CO 80215

OR

Jefferson Foundation
 ATTENTION: Columbine Fund
 c/o 809 Quail Street
 Building 1
 Lakewood, Colorado 80215
 303-982-2211

OR

LMC Community Foundation
 Safe Schools Fund
 Suite 159
 4851 Independence
 Wheat Ridge, CO 80033

OR

Community Healing Fund

c/o Mile High United Way
2505 18th Street
Denver, CO 80211

Donations are tax deductible.

In addition, several families have designated specific memorial funds as follows:

Steven R. Curnow: Memorial Fund c/o First Bank

Kelly Fleming: Memorial donations to Jefferson County Victim Advocates
c/o Jefferson County Sheriff's Office
200 Jefferson County Parkway
Golden, CO 80401

Daniel Mauser: Memorials to: Foundation for Children and Aging
1 Elmwood Ave.
Kansas City, Kansas 66103

❖ Counseling

A new Crisis Resource Center for Mental Health for school-based assistance has been established to coordinate mental health services. Schools needing assistance should call 303-982-9988.

Individuals seeking mental health counseling should call the Jefferson County Center for Mental Health at 303-425-0300.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE MEDIA INFORMATION REQUEST AND

INTERVIEW REQUEST FORMS

MEDIA INFORMATION REQUEST

Reporter/Media Outlet _____

Phone/pager _____

Deadline _____

Specific Questions

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Message taken by _____

Date and time _____

Media Interview Requests

Interview request for _____
(name of person requested)

Media Outlet and Reporter Name _____

Phone/pager _____

Deadline/Date of Interview _____

Topic _____

Message taken by _____

Date and time _____

APPENDIX C

LETTER FROM JEFFERSON COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT



JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1829 Denver West Drive, Building #27 / P.O. Box 4001 / Golden, Colorado 80401-0001 / (303) 982-6500

December 13, 1999

Dear parents, staff and members of the Columbine community:

We wanted to tell you about our disappointment and frustration regarding the December Time Magazine article about the April 20 tragedy. We are concerned about the impact on our Columbine family, and want you to know we will help in any way possible.

We cooperated with one of the correspondents and a photographer from Time Magazine in the development of an article about Columbine High School because we believed it was going to focus on how the school and community have begun the healing process. Time reporters met with administrators, students and staff to talk about the positive things happening at Columbine. Our hope was that this holiday season article would be a catalyst for further healing. Unfortunately for the most part, the positive activities and comments were not included in the magazine.

Instead the main article focused on videotapes produced by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. School district staff members have never seen these tapes, and no one in the school district was consulted about their release. Had we known the Sheriff's Department intended to release these tapes to the media, we would have requested that they refrain from doing so. Previously I have asked the Sheriff's Department both by phone and in writing to keep videotapes related to the April 20 tragedy confidential to protect our community.

When other videotapes were released to the media without the district's consent, we immediately contacted victims' families to warn them. This time, we did not even have advanced notice so we were unable to let our community know. We are truly sorry that this release occurred at the worst possible time of year, and we are concerned about the effects on our community.

We know the Time article will raise issues for many people. Families or staff members needing assistance are encouraged to see their local school counselor or call Columbine Connections, 303-972-7977 or Jefferson Center for Mental Health, 303-425-0300.

Sincerely,

Jane Hammond
Superintendent

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PIOS

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PIOS

Name:

Official Title:

1. Tell me where you were when you first heard about the shootings at Columbine High school and how your day went from there.
2. Did your office have a crisis communication plan? If so, was it useful in this situation?
3. Had you ever been through an experience like this before?
4. Did you ask for help or advice from other communities that experienced similar crises (i.e.; Springfield, Jonesboro)?
5. What kind of action did you take to help the parents of the students at Columbine High School? The Community?
6. You said in your email a while back that you did daily press conferences about school related issues. What were some of those issues?
7. How many different PIOs were involved? Did you work with them or separately?
8. When, would you say, that the crisis officially ended? Are you still seeing the lingering effects?
9. What are the significant events that occurred after the shootings that relate directly to Columbine?
10. What was the difference in the response of local vs. national/international media?
11. What kind of feedback did you receive from the international/national/local media?
12. Why do you think this was such a big story?
13. What do you think went well in the communications response to the crisis?
14. What did not go well and what would you have done differently?

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MEDIA

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MEDIA

Name:

Job Title:

1. Where were you when you first heard about the Columbine High School shootings? How did your day go from there?
2. Were you initially able to get the information you needed? How did you get the information?
3. What was your best source of information? Worst?
4. Did the public information officers show bias toward local or national media?
5. What is your overall assessment of the public information response to the Columbine shootings?
6. What is your overall assessment of the television media coverage of the shooting?
7. In your opinion, what should have been done differently?
8. Had you ever covered a story similar to this?
9. How long were you involved in the coverage of the shooting?
10. Why do you think this was such a big story?
11. Did you attend the media summit at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year? If yes, tell me about your experience there?
12. What are some of the events or stories you covered since the shooting that directly relate back to the shootings?

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