
The school shooting

Author: Kathy Carlston

A few days after I turned 15, I was in the cafeteria waiting in line to buy my lunch. I had an extra special thrill of excitement because it was Free Cookie Tuesday, which meant that I would soon be eating a chocolate chip cookie the size of my face. I finished grabbing my food and barely sat down at the table with my friends when someone shouted from the corner of the cafeteria. I looked over and saw my sister's basketball coach, Dave Sanders, standing on a chair, calling for us to "shut up and get down" because there was someone with a gun outside.

I remember getting down on the ground and cracking a joke to my friend next to me. I didn't believe that it was real – it had to be some sort of terrible Senior Prank. But my friend looked me square in the eye and said "Kathy, I think this is serious." I'm so grateful she did, because something in the energy of her words caught my attention and brought me into the moment. We waited and watched, and heard a few muffled pops. The noise drew closer, and suddenly the student body of the full cafeteria rose to their feet. I remember it looked like an ocean to me, like a sea of people as this group of teenagers was preparing to run.

I rose, too, and followed the wave of thundering feet up the flights of stairs to what we called the main hall. This hallway passed through most of the traditionally academic departments of our school, while gym and art were on the other side of the building. At the top of the stairs from the cafeteria, was an entrance to the science wing. I saw a boy I'd known since third grade turn his course and run through that science wing entrance. Without thinking, my feet took me along that same path and I followed him. We were running too fast to stop at the first classroom, and when we tried the handle to the second classroom, to our horror, it was locked. Filled with dread, we tried the next room which, fortunately, was unlocked. Teachers quickly directed us to line up and sit along the wall closest to the door. Looking back, that was a brilliant idea because it assured that we wouldn't be seen by anyone looking through the glass panel door, which was the only way to see into the room from the hallway.

Shortly after we all sat down on the floor, coach Sanders entered the room. He was the one who had initially shouted in the cafeteria and warned us of the danger. He stood in the doorway and collapsed into the room. He had been shot twice in the chest and was seeking refuge. Over the course of the next few hours, we watched as teachers and two Eagle Scouts gave him first aid, warmed him with fire blankets, and did their best to relay our location to the 911 operators. Hours passed as I huddled between two classmates on that cold tile floor, and I helplessly watched as coach Sanders' blue shirt became red and as his kind face began to turn blue.

Eventually, the SWAT team found us, and we were able to evacuate under their care. Coach was still breathing when we left the room, but passed away in a SWAT team member's arms shortly after we left.

My family was there waiting to catch me when I made it out of the building. The following days and weeks were extremely difficult and filled with pain. I often think of my life as "childhood before Columbine" and "life after Columbine." PTSD was a daily part of all of our lives. I stumbled forward and stayed on the journey toward healing the best that I could.

Certain experiences would instantly and profoundly send me into a flashback. It could be going to a restaurant and hearing dishes loudly crash to the ground. It could be a firework show, especially when I could physically feel the powerful explosions. Over time, through the years and through various types of therapy, many of my triggers diminished and began to heal. One of the major ones that didn't, was triggered whenever I'd go to a grocery store and walk through their meat aisle. Some stores were fine, but in others, as soon as I smelled the meat, my heart would race and I would start to panic in full flashback mode. So generally, I avoided the meat aisle whenever possible.

In October of 2013, I moved to Utah from California. It had been about 14 years since the shooting at Columbine. My mom was in town for a couple of weeks, and we were excitedly looking forward to attending the Sorensen Halloween party.

Every year, my mom's side of the family throws a Halloween party that is absolutely epic and hilarious. For me, it's the event of the year. My mom and I discussed costume ideas, and we decided that I would go as the Swedish Chef and she would join me as my chicken.

We found my mom a delightfully wonderful chicken hat, and also searched for the various pieces that would make up my costume. I could find almost everything I needed, including the giant eyebrows and moustache, the blue collared shirt and the classic chef's hat. But for some odd reason I couldn't find a white apron.

A couple of days before the party, I was out running errands and spotted a grocery store across the parking lot. I had an idea. I entered the store and did my best to ground myself and keep my mind clear. I took deep, steady breaths to stay present in the moment, like I had learned in therapy. As I walked through the aisles and made my way to the meat section, I felt a mixture of nervousness and determination. When I arrived at the deli counter, my head was miraculously still clear and I struck up a conversation with the butcher. I told him about my costume idea and asked him where I might be able to find a white apron. He smiled and told me to hold on for a second. He walked to their employee area and to my surprise, he handed me one of his white Harmon's aprons, and graciously wished me luck. I thanked him and gratefully walked back to my car.

The party was a great success. I was able to celebrate with my family and chortled the borkiest borks and erdaflurdens at the top of my lungs with my lovely Mama Chicken by my side. We ate, laughed and had a raucously good time. I left feeling proud of myself for taking a small step forward in my journey. Trauma recovery can be a long and arduous process, full of stumbles and falls. It can seem hopeless and never ending when in the thick of it. But when I look back on those milestone moments, I begin to comprehend and appreciate how far I have come. And I see more clearly the worth in the road still ahead of me.

Senior year portrait of Kathy Carlston



Media personnel taking pictures of Columbine students on the first day back in the fall of 1999