

I was the principal at Colorado's Columbine High School on April 20, 1999.

I remained principal for fifteen more years.

Virtually every day at the school, I heard variations of *How can you do this? How can you go back? How can you walk those same halls? How can you be reminded every day?*

Many friends and colleagues urged me to move on. I refused to seek or accept a transfer to another school in Jefferson County or move to the Jeffco Public Schools central administration. I needed to be at Columbine. I wanted to be there; I couldn't walk away. Not from the kids, not from the high school, and not from the suburban school community to the southwest of downtown Denver. I wanted to see to it that Columbine came to define something other than tragedy. I wanted it to become a story of courage, love, heart, resilience, and recovery. I wanted to lead the way to that healing.

In the spring of 2014, I looked out from the stage at Fiddler's Green Amphitheatre in Greenwood Village at the more than four hundred Columbine seniors. They would be my last class. I had been at the school for thirty-five years. Before becoming principal in 1996 and spending eighteen school years in that job, I had served seventeen years in a number of roles, including a social studies teacher, dean of students, assistant principal, and coach.

These kids knew me, and always would know me, as "Mr. De."

Well, that or "Coach De" or "Papa De."

They were *my* kids.

That day, after taking a selfie with my final graduating class behind me (proving that you can teach a veteran educator new tricks), emotion choked my voice as I spoke to those seniors:

“My first class was the class of ’97, and my last is this class,” I said. “We are family. We are Columbine. Once a Rebel, always a Rebel. You’ve made me a proud papa. I love you.”

Teacher and coach Ivory Moore then went through an emotion-filled school tradition, leading us in our school chant: “We Are . . . Columbine.” It built to a crescendo and illustrated that sometimes simple is the most effective approach.

Looking out on those fresh faces, students filled with dreams of what might be for them, I thought back to the promise I made at vigil held on April 21, 1999, at Light of the World Catholic Church. That tearful morning, with school district officials and politicians listening, I vowed to the students I would remain principal until the classes enrolled at Columbine at the time of the tragedy had graduated.

That would have taken me through the Class of 2002.

Soon, though, I extended that to cover the kids attending classes in the Columbine feeder system in April 1999 as well. That committed me through the Class of 2012.

I reached 2012 on the job . . . and kept going.

I stayed on, at least in part, because a parent informed me her child was in the first year of a two-year preschool program in April 1999 and wouldn’t graduate until 2013. Those kids, as young as they were in 1999, were mine, too. So I stayed through the 2013 commencement and went one more year. Suddenly, or so it seemed, spring of 2014 arrived. I knew it would be my final graduation ceremony as principal of Columbine High School. I was finishing up.

Most of those kids in front of me at Fiddler’s Green, the Class of 2014, had been three years old on April 20, 1999. They knew my history, knew my commitment, and knew I loved them and that I wasn’t hesitant about showing it.

As a school and as a community, we had been through so much. Outsiders wanted to fixate on the horrors or on the killers, but we remembered the dead and wounded. We honored them by turning

“Columbine” into a story of heart, love, resilience, courage, and recovery. Every day I reminded myself, our students, staff members, and anyone else who would listen that “We were a great school, we *are* a great school, and we will continue to be a great school. The members of the Columbine community make it great.” At the one-year anniversary of the tragedy, we coined the phrase, “A Time to Remember, a Time to Hope.” Those words, along with “Never Forget,” are still appropriate and often cited.

The students crossed the stage to receive their diplomas from the dignitaries and then found me waiting at the bottom of the steps to congratulate them. The hugs were plentiful, and I knew we had succeeded in transforming the story. Together we made it through the heartache, anger, and despair. *That* is the true and important Columbine story nearly twenty years after the murders.

Since retiring in 2014, I’ve been telling the story to audiences across the United States, Canada, and Europe. I’ve spoken to leaders in business and education, to mental health groups, to judges, prosecutors, and justices, to district attorneys, to firefighters, police officers, and other first responders, and to students at school assemblies and leadership academies. Thousands have heard me speak about the Columbine story, and thousands more will hear it in the foreseeable future.

At my presentations, I usually am asked if I am writing a book or told I *should* write one.

Finally, here it is. It’s time.

In the days and years after the killings, I had to be guarded in my responses and public comments about the two murderers and the events of the day. I couldn’t aggressively respond to the media’s misstatements and exaggerations or the internet-driven myths. Lawsuits were pending against the school district and Jefferson County, and I was named in eight of them. I was ordered not to address issues tied to the litigation. Even if that hadn’t been the case, I wanted to keep the focus on the recovery while respecting the memories and the families of murdered students: Cassie Bernall, Steven Curnow, Corey DePooter, Kelly Fleming, Matthew Kechter, Daniel Mauser, Daniel Rohrbough, Rachel Scott, Isaiah Shoels, John Tomlin, Lauren Townsend, and Kyle Velasquez. I wanted to honor my dear friend, teacher-coach Dave Sanders, who was murdered that day. I wanted to support the twenty-six others who were physically injured or wounded—and the countless others in our school and community whose hearts were forever scarred by what we’d witnessed.

On the personal level, the horrific events of April 20, 1999 don’t define me as much as does the strength of the Columbine student body, staff members, and community. I’m confident that my love for young people and my job resonates with those who have made public education their careers. I needed Columbine—its people, its heart—more than it needed me.

During my presentations, I tell audiences of my background, how I turned to education and coaching after realizing the New York Yankees weren't going to draft and sign me, and that my back-up plan of accounting wasn't for me. I tell them how I handled the tragedy, not just that day, but for years beyond. People in those audiences feel a sense of empathy; a bond of sorts forms as they come to understand how we fought and transformed the story—how we did it *together*.

This book includes input from my siblings, Anthony DeAngelis and LuAnn DeAngelis Dwyer; my high school sweetheart and wife, Diane (there's a story there, and we'll get to it in a bit); my life-long best friend, Rick DeBell; my high school teacher, baseball coach and mentor Chris Dittman; and, finally, my Columbine compatriots, Tom Tonelli and Kiki Leyba, both terrific teachers who, as of this writing, still are on the school faculty. Tom is a 1988 Columbine graduate who joined the faculty in 1994. Kiki dropped out of high school at age sixteen and earned his GED while working in construction. He attended Metropolitan State in Denver, did his student teaching at Columbine, then began his teaching career with us in 1998–99. My motivation in including their voices is to add to the portrait and narrative of our story and not to be showered with praise, with Kiki and Tom as representative voices of the Columbine constituency. Ricky, by the way, good-naturedly held out for a payment of \$3.82, seeking to match the combined prices of a cannoli, Tuddy Toots, Little Devil, and a Coke at Carbone's in the North Denver of our youth!