Columbine Author Speaks at Conference

Andrea J. Cook

As a student at the infamous school massacre, Brooks Brown learned he can help.

In all of his six years of elementary school, two years of junior high and four years of high school, it was one teacher, in one classroom, on one day in a one-semester philosophy class who saved Brooks Brown's life.

All it takes is "one butterfly, flapping its wings" to change a child's life by making life a little easier, according to Brown. Brown, the author of No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine High School, spoke ... at the 11th annual Reclaiming Youth International No Disposable Kids conference at Rushmore Plaza Holiday Inn [in Rapid City, South Dakota]. [He also received the Spirit of Youth Award given at the Crazy Horse Memorial event]

Brown, who worked with Michael Moore on his Academy Award winning documentary, "Bowling for Columbine," said the letters he received from children and adults after the Columbine shootings prompted him to become involved in trying to make a difference in the lives of kids. Brown was a senior at Columbine High School when on April 20, 1999, his classmates, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, entered the school and killed 12 students and a teacher. They wounded 21 others before they killed themselves.

Brown and Klebold had been friends since second grade. As third graders, they tested as highly intelligent and were channeled into a gifted program. Brown also knew Harris. Brown described himself and Klebold as skinny, geeky kids who were interested in computers and weren't good at sports.

In the "Brady Bunch" world of Littleton, Colorado, teachers treated the "just right" kids well because they were exactly what they wanted them to be. Brown said, "A lot of us weren't. We were skinny, did computers and didn't do sports very well," he said. "We were awkward, and we got beat up all the time, but the teachers didn't care."

Junior high and high school were the worst years for anyone who wasn't "just right," Brown said, relating how he was bullied in junior high. The bullying increased in high school for Brown when he became involved in drama and debate.

At Columbine, if you were in debate and drama, you were not only smart, but you were also labeled "queer," he said.

When Brown finally asked his parents for help, they went with him to a school counselor whose only response was to tell his parents they had to "accept his lifestyle choice."

Brown, who is not gay, said he dealt with beatings and innuendos from students and terrible treatment from teachers until his senior year in high school, when the members of his class started getting along. During his last semester, Brown took a philosophy course. Reclaiming Children and Youth 13:3 fall 2004 -^ pp. 181-182 181

"Everyone asks, 'What's the X factor?'" Brown said. "It all goes back to one teacher who cared about students and taught them to get along." That teacher, Mr. Critser, also introduced Brown to Taoism.

"Buddha equated water with compassion and fire with anger," Brown said. "He spoke about how fire in very small amounts can be put out with a cup of water." Critser put out the fire in him that had started growing in junior high, Brown said.

The young men did not have specific targets, he said. "Their original plan was to kill 700 people," Brown said. The students carried two propane tanks into the school cafeteria. They were well-armed with guns and pipe bombs. "They were not messing around. They weren't fooling," Brown said.

After the Columbine killings, Brown said he received letters from kids and adults all over the country who said, "I went through it."

"Kids all over the country knew why Columbine happened before any of you did," he told the audience. "You can only take (expletive) so long."

That's when he decided to make a difference—that and because of Rachel Scott, one of the students who died at Columbine, he said. "She was a very compassionate person," he said. "One of the things she taught me is that every day should be a good day to die."

Brown, who tried college for three weeks, plans to become a documentary filmmaker. When parents ask Brown how they can help their children, the first thing he tells them is to realize children are adults with less life experience.

"We aren't stupid. We kind of know what we're actually doing," he said. And parents of the so-called geeks? "Don't be scared, because the kids who are like me end up learning the most from high school," he said. "The learning experiences I suffered through taught me more about life than anything," Brown said. "I wouldn't go back and change it because it gives me the opportunity to go out and be someone who changes things."

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