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Comprehending Columbine

Larkin, Ralph W.

Published by Temple University Press

Larkin, W..

Comprehending Columbine.

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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2

GOD'S COUNTRY

COLUMBINE IS GOD'S COUNTRY in at least two ways: first, it is nestled into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. To the east is 1000 miles of plains. From the mile high city of Denver, the eastern escarpment of the Rocky Mountains rises another mile and a half in altitude. Running north and south for as far as the eye can see is the magnificent mountain range that forms the continental divide of this country. The vistas fare breathtaking and spectacular. Few suburbanites are as fortunate as those in southern Jefferson County who can sit on their patios and have a majestic view of the mountains, many of which are snowcapped year-round. Figure 2.1 is a view of the Rockies in the spring, a few miles north of Littleton.

The second reason that Columbine is God's country is because it is literally viewed that way by the many evangelical Christians who live in the area. Columbine is openly and sometimes aggressively religious. It has one of the largest concentrations of Christian evangelicals in the country. Perhaps the clearest expression of the fusion of physical and spiritual expressions of the divine is in the pulpit of the West Bowles Community Church, an evangelical Presbyterian congregation that sits at the western end of southern Jefferson County. The Church is laid out so that the parishioners are facing west. In the center of the pulpit is a twenty-foot-wide, forty-foot-high window that faces the Rocky Mountains. During services, the window is



FIGURE 2.1: *A view of the Rockies from near Golden in late spring*

sometimes fully covered with a curtain. When the curtain is opened, congregants are exposed to an unobstructed view of the Rocky Mountains in front of which is superimposed a simple outline of a cross.

Before proceeding, geographical confusions need to be cleared up. Columbine is an unincorporated territory in southern Jefferson County. It is west of Littleton, which is separated from Columbine administratively because it is incorporated as its own city and because it is located in Arapahoe County. In Littleton, housing is older and more modest than in Columbine. Just to the west of Littleton is a small, mostly uninhabited area called “Columbine Valley.” Further west is the Columbine High School catchment area. Between Littleton on the east, Chatfield Reservoir on the south, State Highway 470 on the west, and the city of Lakewood on the north, three high schools, Chatfield, Columbine, and Dakota Ridge, serve students in that region of southern Jefferson County. Because the Jefferson County schools allow for a certain amount of choice of schools, mobility of students between high schools is common. However, the catchment area of Columbine High School is in the eastern area of the territory closest to Littleton, referred to by the Jefferson County schools as the “Columbine articulation area” (Jefferson County Public Schools 2004). Thus, the geographic term “Columbine” refers specifically to the catchment area of Columbine High School, which runs from the Littleton and Arapahoe County line on the east to the Chatfield Reservoir on the south, Wadsworth Boulevard on the west, and Lakewood on the north. For the purpose of this

study, the term “Columbine” will be used to designate the territory in southern Jefferson County bounded by Arapahoe County on the east, Route 470 on the south and west, and Bowles reservoir and West Bellevue Avenue on the north.

Although typically suburban in terms of housing developments with serpentine roads set off, sometimes in the form of a gated community, from broad straight streets that are populated by strip malls, it has an aura of squeaky cleanliness. Housing developments are separated from each other by uncultivated open spaces, parks, rivulets, and ponds. It is common to see developments separated from each other by several acres of prairie grass.

Because the county seat is in Golden, twenty miles away in northern Jefferson County, the major evidence of government in the area is the schools. Much more prominent noncommercial social institutions are the numerous churches that populate the area. The self-image of southern Jefferson County is that of peaceful Christians living in harmony with each other and with their environment. The people of Columbine are deeply religious. The Littleton-Columbine area contains about 60,000 residents and seventy Christian churches, including one Eastern Orthodox congregation. If we assume an average family size of four persons, that means that there is one religious institution for every 200 to 250 families. Of the seventy churches, twenty-three are mainline Protestant churches,

TABLE 1.1 HOUSING STATISTICS FOR COLUMBINE AND UNITED STATES

	COLUMBINE	U.S.
Housing Occupant (%)		
Owner	85.05	66.19
Renter	14.95	33.81
Number of Bedrooms (%)		
None	0.70	3.25
1	5.81	14.70
2	15.01	31.20
3	31.64	42.16
4	40.93	15.18
5 or more	8.22	3.40
Median Value of Owner Occupied Houses	\$232,625	\$115,012
Year House Built (Columbine Only, %)		
1990–2000	24.77	
1980–1989	16.77	
1970–1979	44.46	
1960–1969	12.06	
1959 or earlier	1.94	

Note: data are drawn from the U. S. Bureau of Census, 2000 decennial census for the United States total population excluding Puerto Rico and for the eight census tracts that cover Columbine (Jefferson County Census Tracts 120.48-120.55).

including Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian; four are Catholic. The most popular sect by far, however, is the Baptist Church, with ten separate congregations. Other fundamentalist congregations include the Assembly of God, Calvary Chapel, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Gospel (Four Square and Full), Holiness, Church of the Nazarene, and Pentecostal. In addition to these are numerous evangelical congregations, with the West Bowles Community Church (Evangelical Presbyterian) one of the largest and most successful congregations in the area.

Columbine is a new community, developed over the last thirty years. According to the United States Census Bureau, nearly one-quarter of the buildings in the area are ten years old or less (Table 1.1). Nearly half of the houses built in Columbine were constructed in the 1970s. In addition, and can be seen in Table 1.1, the vast majority of homes are owner-occupied and are quite large, with virtually half of them having four or more bedrooms, according children their own private spaces. The median value of houses in Columbine is twice the national average (\$232,625 compared to \$115,012 in 2000).

Visual observation of the Columbine High School catchment area reveals two major types of housing: detached single-family dwellings and town houses. Some townhouse developments feature modest two- and three-bedroom homes, while others tend to be much larger. Similarly, nearly all single-family dwelling units are parts of large developments. Some older developments, such as those at the eastern boundary of Columbine near Littleton, tend to be older and smaller than those built to the west. These developments contain three- and four-bedroom single-story ranch-style houses. The developments further west and closer to the mountains are more likely to be two-story homes with a greater number of rooms. An aerial view of southern Jefferson County suggests that real estate is being developed from east to west and from north to south. Residential areas closest to Littleton are fairly dense with little in the way of undeveloped territory. To the south and west, residential developments become sparser with more tracts of undeveloped acreage. Some developments to the south and west are surrounded by open fields. Southern Jefferson County is still in the process of being developed as it spreads south and west.

Columbine is a bastion of upper-middle-class whites. The graphs below tell the tale. Columbine is over 90 percent white (Figure 2.2). The second largest category, Latinos, with slightly more than 5 percent, is virtually invisible as a separate ethnic category. My observations of Columbine suggested that the majority of Latinos are white persons with Spanish surnames; I did not see many persons with Latino features. Similarly, black people were quite rare. The only time I observed Asians was at an all-Asian pickup basketball game in Clement Park;

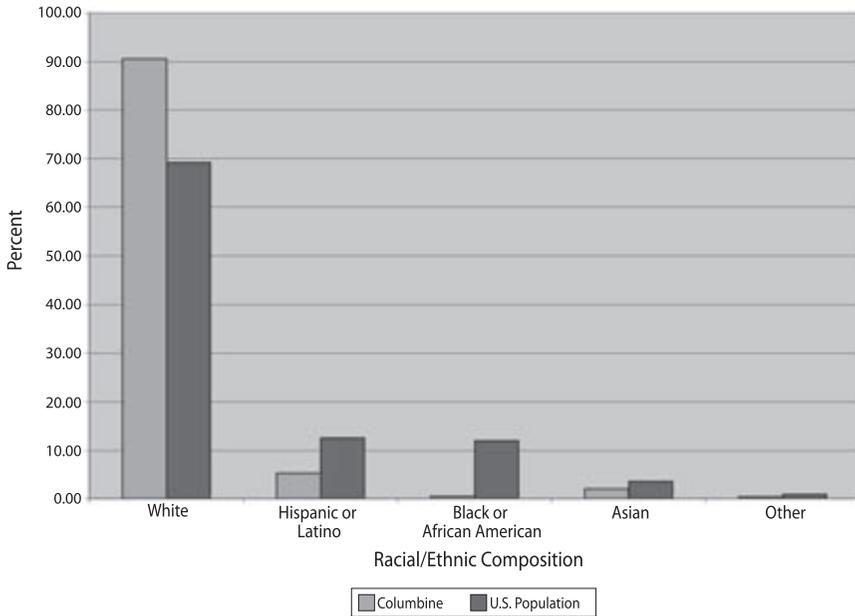


FIGURE 2.2: *Racial composition of Columbine and the United States*

two carloads of Asian teenagers drove into a parking space near the basketball court and played a game among themselves. No players from any other ethnic group were involved.

Some students commented on the overwhelming whiteness of the area. On his web site, Eric Harris commented, “Littleton, Colorado, isn’t a great place to grow up as a white boy. If I had my druthers, I’d be anywhere else at all, even in some place with lots of malt-liquor-drinking, rhyme-busting, ass-capping Negroes and perhaps a few squinty-eyed, dog-eating Chinese people!”(Harris’s web site now defunct.) When I interviewed four females, formerly students at Columbine High School, they mused about how white Columbine was and wondered whether it prepared them for living in a more racially and culturally diverse world. Jeff Stark, former Columbine student and writer for Salon.com, wrote that he and his friends called the place, “Little fun” because nothing ever happened there. It was boring.

Not only is the populace of Columbine overwhelmingly white, they are also overwhelmingly native born. Figure 2.3 compares place of birth for Columbine to the total U.S. population. Columbine is 97 percent native born compared to 89 percent of the general American population. Although 40 percent were born within the State of Colorado, 55 percent were born outside the state. This suggests that Columbine is a place of choice for its adult residents.

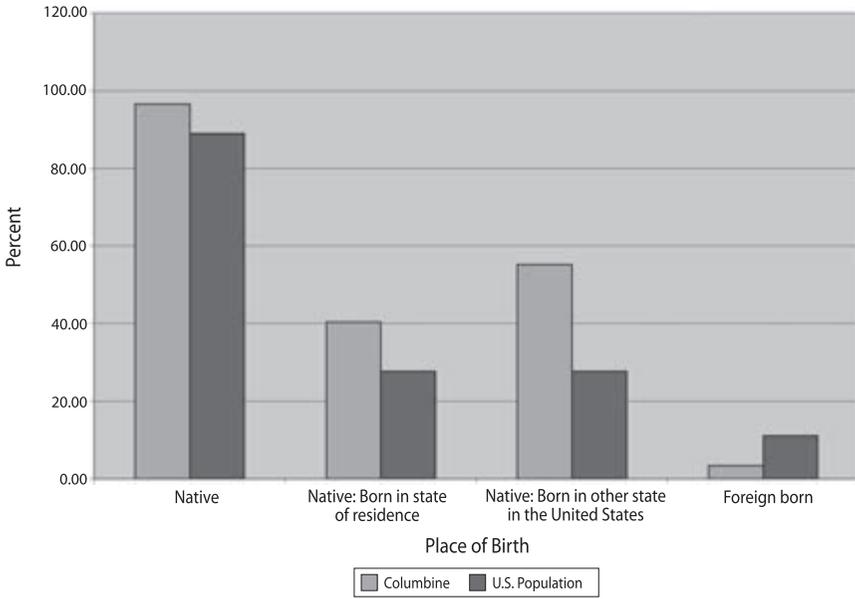


FIGURE 2.3 *Nativity for Columbine and the United States*

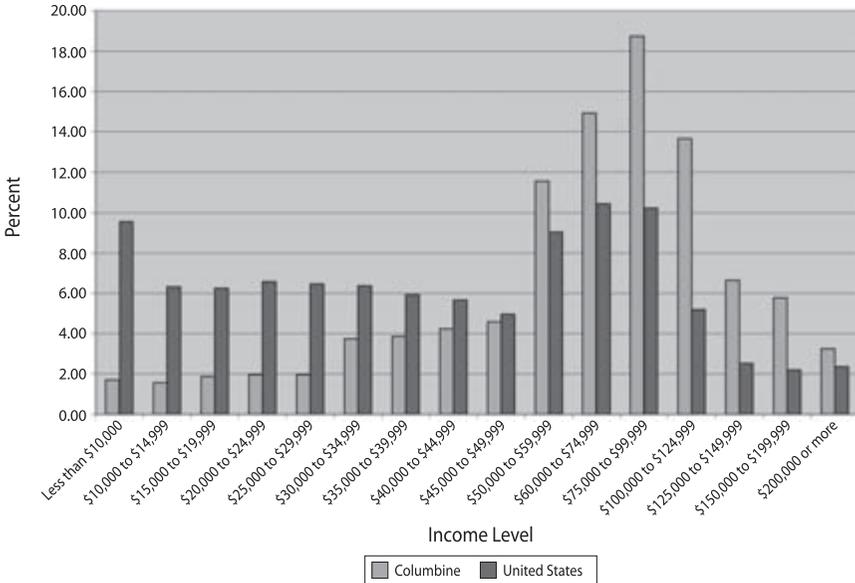


FIGURE 2.4: *Income distribution for Columbine and the United States*

Socioeconomic indicators demonstrate the nearly exclusively upper-middle-class character of Columbine. Figure 2.4 presents the income distribution for Columbine compared to the United States population as a whole. Nearly 60 percent of U.S. families have incomes between \$50,000 and \$125,000 a year; an additional 15 percent make more than \$125,000 a year. The median income for Columbine's families is \$61,005, 30 percent higher than the national family median income at \$42,690. Approximately 80 percent of the Columbine families have incomes above the national median.

Not surprisingly, Columbine residents have more education than the national populace (Figure 2.5). The U.S. population is split about equally between those persons who have had at least some college education and those with a high school education or less. Slightly more than 50 percent of the national population has completed high school; nearly 80 percent of adults in Columbine completed high school. Twice the proportion of Columbine residents has baccalaureate degrees as the national population (32% to 16%). Compared to 8 percent of the nation as a whole, 13 percent of adult Columbine residents have master's degrees.

The statistics on educational attainment present two surprises: first, the proportion of the population with doctorate degrees in Columbine is smaller than

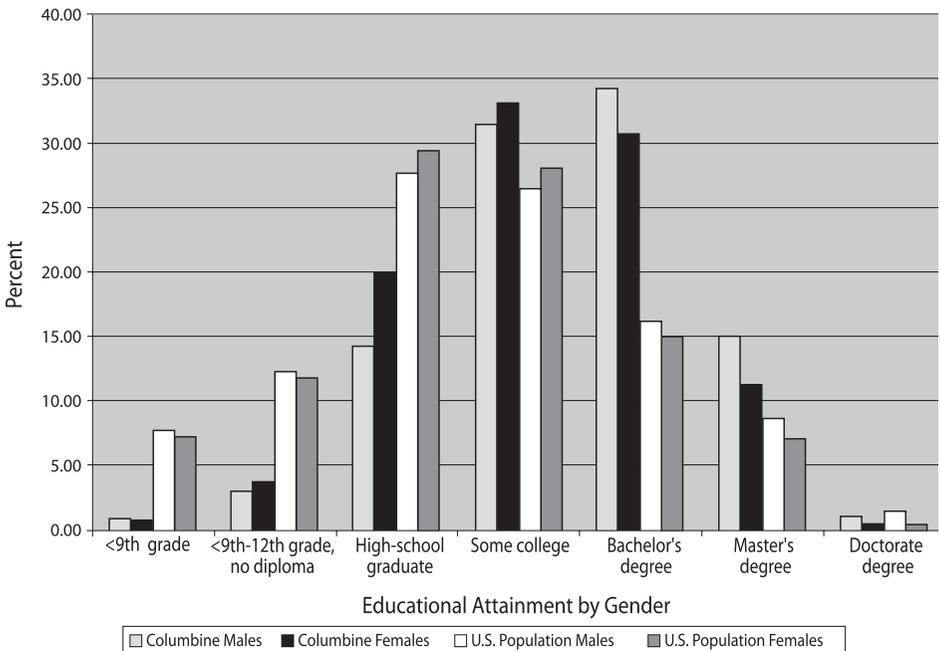


FIGURE 2.5: Educational attainment for Columbine and for the United States by gender

in the national population (1.08 to 1.38 for males; 0.43 to 0.58 for females). These data suggest that Columbine is an upper-middle-class community; however, when compared to other upper middle-class communities, it has fewer high-end professionals, such as medical doctors, college professors, Ph.D.-level psychologists, and other professionals with doctorates (e.g., doctors of education, social work, or business administration). This may be because there are no large hospitals in the area, although the Colorado Mental Health Institute at Fort Logan is about five miles away, University of Denver is about ten miles away and the downtown Denver educational complex housing the University of Colorado Denver campus, Denver (Metro) State College, and Denver Community College is about twenty miles to the north.

The second surprise is that the differential between educational attainment of men and women in Columbine is greater than that in the general population, especially among college graduates and those with master's degrees. In the general population, the difference between males and females is slightly more than 1 percent in favor of the males. In Columbine, the percentage differences between the genders in those two categories are between 3 percent and 4 percent, with a greater portion of the males having higher degrees. Slightly more than 50 percent of the adult males in Columbine are college educated; only 42 percent of the females have bachelor degrees, a difference of 8 percent. This

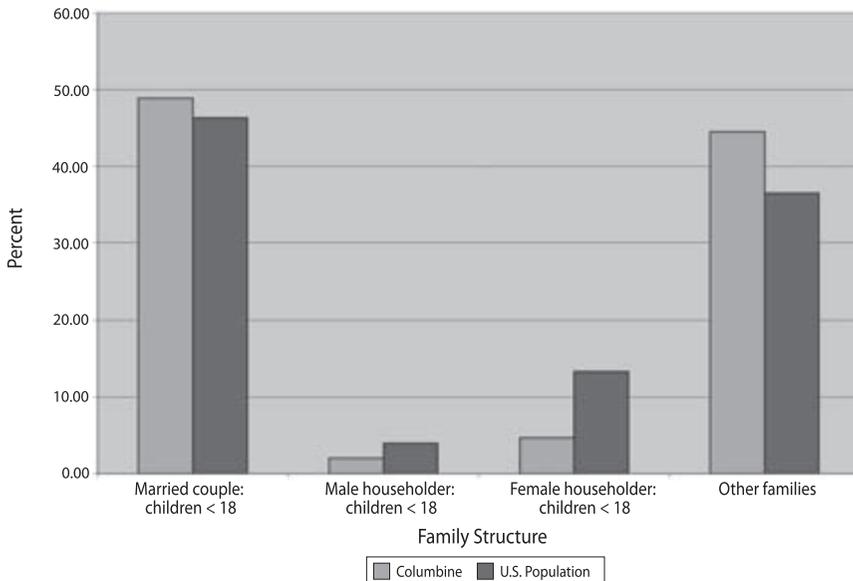


FIGURE 2.6: *Family composition for Columbine and the United States*

differential is more than twice that of the national population, in which 26 percent of the men and 23 percent of the women have a college education, a difference of about 3 percent. These statistics suggest that Columbine, relative to the nation as a whole, may have a smaller proportion of professional women than other upper middle-class communities. Columbine has an aura about it of having intact nuclear families characterized by stay-at-home moms. Indeed, this image is bolstered by statistics on family composition (Figure 2.6).

Although Columbine is fairly typical of the nation in its proportion of married couples with children under eighteen (49% to 46%), dramatic differences are found between Columbine and the national population in single householder families: Approximately 5 percent of Columbine families are headed by a single female; the national rate is nearly three times that (14%). Similarly, households headed by a single male constitute 2 percent of Columbine families and 4 percent of the total population.

The demographics bear out media impressions of Columbine: it is a solidly white, affluent suburb that takes a certain amount of pride in its political and cultural conservatism. It has more intact families than most places in the United States. It is a place where families move to raise children; it has a reputation for excellent schools. Recreational facilities and open areas abound. Within a mile of Columbine High School are the Southwest Plaza Regional Mall and Bowles Crossing Shopping Center, constituting one of the largest shopping areas in the region.

The economic basis for the Littleton-Southern Jefferson County area is primarily high-tech corporations. The largest employer in the area is Qwest Communications, with 47,000 employees, 3,000 of whom are employed in Littleton (City of Littleton 2004). Qwest is a telecommunications company that provides satellite and landline telecommunication services. The second largest private employer is EchoStar, a national company of 15,000 employees, of which 1,900 are headquartered in Littleton. The company maintains eight orbital satellites and sells receiver dishes to clients for telecommunications, including television. The third largest private employer is Lockheed Martin space systems, with between six and seven hundred employees. It was featured prominently in Michael Moore's film, "Bowling for Columbine." Moore noted that the facility was involved in secret defense research and was part of the military-industrial complex. The fourth-largest private employer is Norgren, a company of six hundred employees that makes pneumatic valves. The remainder of the employers have fewer than five hundred employees. Of the remaining employers that have between one hundred and five hundred employees, six are car dealerships; the Mercedes-Benz dealer has one hundred employees, and the local Lexus

dealership employs 150. The success of the dealerships can be witnessed on the roads. My informal observations suggested that about half of the private vehicles on the roads are either late model SUVs or pickup trucks. The only place where I saw more sedans than SUVs was in the teachers' parking lot at Columbine High School.

Here is the embodiment of the American dream: spacious suburban homes, strip malls, schools, large recreational areas, and churches. Columbine might be considered Colorado's Bible belt. Fifty miles to the south of Columbine is Colorado Springs, the very heart of the Christian right, headquarters of Focus on the Family and home to one of the largest chapters of the Christian Coalition in the country (Cooper 1995). A Mormon regional center that serves several states is located in Littleton (Cullen 1999a). Columbine residents view themselves as hard-working, morally upright, patriotic, American citizens. Most are Republicans and proud of it. They believe in racial tolerance even though in their community there are very few racial minorities to tolerate. They see themselves, as nearly all Americans do, as good people. They view their lives of privilege as evidence of the goodness of an American society that rewards virtue with material well-being and strong communities of like-minded individuals.

COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL, APRIL 19, 1999

Columbine High School is a comprehensive high school that serves about 1800 students on a sprawling campus, which is part of a large educational and recreational complex that contains Robert F. Clement Park, Johnson Reservoir, and the Columbine Public Library. The school campus occupies about one-fourth of the territory located just south of Clement Park. The school itself consists of a single building surrounded by play fields. Figure 2.7 shows Rebel Hill, behind the playing fields, where the fifteen crosses were first placed following the shootings. Figure 2.8 shows the Columbine High School sign at the Pierce Avenue entrance to the school.

Columbine High School was described to this researcher by Frank DeAngelis, the principal, as a typical suburban high school. He described the school in glowing terms:

- D: Probably about 80 percent of our students go on to college. Academics are very important. We have a majority of our students that take at least three or four years of math, in addition to the other requirements—three or four years of math aren't required. Our students do

FIGURE 2.7: *Rebel Hill*

very well academically: not only do they attend college in the state of Colorado, but around the nation. As far as test scores on standardized tests, we're always near the top. Jefferson County, the school district, we're near the top in the state.

RL: Are you talking about SATs?

D: SATs, ACT ... in Colorado within the last five or six years, CSTAPT scores, which are Colorado State Assessment Program, and once again our students did very well as freshmen and sophomores on that standardized test. I think it's really a great comprehensive educational program. We're a very traditional school, eight periods a day, fifty-minutes a period; we're not on block schedule. [We have] a very established staff. Now that's changed a little bit over the past few years since we've been losing a few teachers due to retirement. The majority of our staff members have master's degrees. We have over thirty-one clubs where the students can participate. There can be full curricula clubs, there's forensics, and debate, we have an outstanding performing arts program, our vocal music and instrumental programs are large programs. We have three full-time staff members in the music area, and over forty kids are involved in our music program.



FIGURE 2.8: *Columbine High School sign, Pierce Avenue*

Mr. DeAngelis's characterization of the quality of the instructional program was corroborated by the state accountability report (Colorado Department of Education 2003), which ranked Columbine High School as "high" in academic performance, using a five-category scheme with the following ranks: unsatisfactory, low, average, high, and excellent. However, most of the comprehensive high schools in the Littleton-Southern Jefferson County area were similarly rated. Heritage High School, located in the city of Littleton and serving approximately the same number of students, was ranked "excellent." Typically, high schools serving upper-middle-class white populations, such as Columbine, have an academic program that is quite good and apparently up to the expectations of the community. Following the shootings, *Rocky Mountain News* reporter Lynn Bartels (1999) interviewed Columbine student Elsa Coffey-Berg who had been sitting next to one of the unexploded bombs left by Klebold and Harris. Elsa, the reporter noted, was planning to study international relations at Colorado State University. The following characterization of Columbine High School was excerpted from the interview:

Elsa Coffey-Berg's parents checked out Jefferson County schools before they moved to Colorado from Idaho in 1998. "We chose Columbine because of its academics," Elsa said. "We had chosen this school because it was so, like, perfect."... Over the years, she's wondered where the

stories are on the good things about Columbine, the choir singing in nursing homes or National Honor Society members performing community service. "I'm really glad I'm at Columbine. There's no place that [I] would rather graduate from. There are great teachers[,] and I have great friends. I love it here."

In a letter to the editor of the *Phi Delta Kappan*, an educational journal, Marilyn Salzman (2001) spokesperson for the Jefferson County Schools, characterized Columbine High School as follows:

Columbine High School has a 26-year history of excellence. Last year, its students had the highest SAT scores of the 16 neighborhood high schools in Jefferson County, Colorado. About 85% of Columbine students go on to college. The daily attendance rate is 95%, and the graduation rate is 93%.

The school has an award-winning forensics team, a world-class band, a model peer-counseling program, and state championship sports teams. Seven of the past eight years Columbine has won the Paul Davis Sportsmanship Award for Jefferson County. The winning school is chosen by a vote of every varsity athletic coach.

The extent of student participation in extracurricular activities characterized by Principal DeAngelis was supported by student interviews. The debate team had between thirty and forty members. The Drama Club was large and had an enthusiastic following; their productions were highly successful and included a sophisticated repertoire. Columbine High School was characterized not just as a good school, but one of the best in the state. Even students who were harsh critics of the school spoke of its academic program positively. Typically, students divided teachers into those they loved and those who were "assholes." However, according to the students, Columbine High School certainly had its share of gifted teachers. For example:

Mr. [X] ... would send you to the principal's office for swearing in class, and I mean saying "hell" or "damn," period, swearing. If you were late, if you ditched, he called your parents. He took away a letter grade. He did not fuck around. And we loved his class more than anything. My favorite class[es] I've ever had was his philosophy class, and my history class I had with him. He was the most hard-ass teacher. So it has nothing to do with being a hard ass. A lot of teachers think, "Well, I'm not as

easy-going so the kids are going to hate me.” He was a super hard ass. He was a *brilliant* teacher. He knew what he was talking about. The requirement for the philosophy class, as far as curriculum in Jefferson County goes, because they’d just started philosophy classes [was that] we had to learn and understand and be able to discuss intelligently Plato and Aristotle, all these western philosophers. So [X], instead of having us waste time on all these Western philosophers that you really don’t need to know any more, we spent six weeks on them, we learned them, we had them memorized, we did them, and then we went on to Eastern philosophy. Then we spent maybe six or seven weeks doing tai-chi in class, learning Lao Tzu, all these brilliant philosophers that weren’t even part of the class. And he didn’t just know them; he knew everything about every one of these philosophers. He could discuss it with us.

He [Mr. X] didn’t make fun of kids. He never said anyone had a wrong answer. He knew to direct them and show them how they could be “more right” is how he put it. And even kids who were the dumbest sons-of-bitches I ever met in my life, like this one kid on the football team, [K], he was probably the stupidest person I ever met intelligence-wise, he was just lower. He could not hold a conversation about anything. It was sad. And he raised his hand in Mr. [X’s] class, this kid who never talked. He raised his hand, and he and I had debates in class. I mean he reached kids, like freakish. He knew, he cared, he got to them—brilliant. The best teacher, the way all teachers should be, is Mr. [X], above and beyond all things (Recorded May 13, 2003).

Another student revealed the following:

I thought I got a good education [at Columbine High School] for the most part, and anything that was for my disadvantage was my own fault. The big thing as far as my education at Columbine was that there were two math programs at Columbine. You could chose the traditional math program, where you do problem after problem after problem, and there’s the interactive math program which is word problems where you have to show that you know what you’re doing with the equation rather than solving it a million times. Which is good in its own right, but there’s not a lot of repetition and I fell behind in math. I took four years but then I had to take remedial courses in high school to catch myself up. But as far as the English department, they were all wonderful. Science department was wonderful. Social science department was wonderful, gym was

wonderful—I couldn't have asked for much better. I would have liked a few more advanced placement opportunities and Honors programs but you know, it's public school and it's hard to offer much of that, especially when you're Jefferson County... . We had AP classes, but you couldn't really get into anything until your senior year. The only option that you had before senior year was that you could take accelerated chemistry or accelerated physics (Recorded April 10, 2003).

A student who attended the University of Colorado, the state's premier public educational institution, had this to say about her education at Columbine High School:

RL: Now how well did you feel you were prepared for college?

EK: Since I took a lot of, you could say, "tough courses"—I took AP English, AP History, statistics, Spanish, and stuff like that, I took a lot of the harder, more demanding classes my senior year, rather than slacking off, so going into college—granted, I felt I was prepared in some aspects; in other aspects I wasn't. You know, from the educational level I'd say I was prepared for it, but for going from, I'd say, an over-protective mother to having a lot of independence, that was a big change. Based on academics, I felt I was prepared.

RL: Did you see much change in your grade point average between high school and college?

EK: No [giggle], it stayed exactly the same.

RL: That's interesting.

EK: I was really scared, because at orientation at CU they told us that your grade point average would drop a whole point from high school to college. And I was like, "Oh great, I'm going to go from a 3.7, 3.6, down to a 2.7, 2.6." I mean it would fluctuate, based on the semester, but I went out pulling a 3.3 (Recorded May 5, 2003).

EK continued to talk about a favorite teacher at Columbine High School who retired and only substituted at Columbine:

EK: He would only really substitute at Columbine. I actually invited him to my college graduation party, but he was unable to attend. So that's how memorable he was to me.

RL: And it sounds like he's got a real allegiance to Columbine.

EK: Yeah, he did.

RL: And why was that, do you think?

EK: He said because of the students. The atmosphere at Columbine is because of—he said the students because of their behavior, that they were there to learn rather than just to, you know, screw around. He got the impression that the students really cared (Recorded May 5, 2003).

A consensus existed among students, faculty, and Principal DeAngelis that Columbine offered students a rigorous academic program that prepared them for higher education. In addition, a wide range of student clubs and programs existed that allowed students to participate in numerous academically related activities such as forensics, drama, music, computers, and so forth. The level of student participation in what C. Wayne Gordon (1957) called the “semicurriculum” of sports, clubs, interest groups, and school activities was extremely high. In my study of a suburban high school in 1976 (Larkin 1979), I found that the motivational and communal basis for participation in high school activities had been decimated; students tended to view school as unpaid labor. Therefore, the vast majority withdrew from voluntary participation. The club structure in that suburban high school had withered away to the point of nonexistence. Students who participated in clubs did so cynically, with an eye to putting such participation on their college applications.

This was not the case with Columbine High School, which had a rich club structure and high levels of student participation. In the quotation above, Principal DeAngelis characterized Columbine High School as “traditional.” In another interview, he described the high school as “conservative” with a highly religious student body. Indeed, Columbine High School seems to be a throwback to the 1950s in many ways: overwhelmingly white, strong academically, sports crazy, with a high level of school spirit, heavy participation in school clubs, and well-behaved students. Prior to the shootings on April 20, 1999, Columbine High School was a source of community pride; today, it still is a source of pride, perhaps even more fiercely than before the shootings. On this researcher’s first visit to Columbine High School, every member of the office staff was dressed in Columbine High School insignia wear: It was Columbine Pride Day, and staffers took it seriously. However, there is a defensiveness to that pride as a consequence of the negative publicity associated with the Columbine High School shootings. In the spring of 2003, this researcher happened upon a group of one female and four male Columbine High School seniors at a restaurant who were anticipating the end of the school year. Suggesting that they were members of the leading crowd, they

claimed that all students were treated equally at Columbine High School by the administration, and that the administration does a great job in controlling harassment. They claimed that harassment of low-status students by student athletes was more reminiscent of middle school conflicts. A reporter returning from the fifth anniversary memorial of the shootings informed this researcher that although students from neighboring Chatfield, Heritage, and Dakota Ridge High Schools were critical of their schools, Columbine students simply could not find anything negative about their school. However, two parents who were interviewed in 2003 and a student who had a younger brother in Columbine High School stated that the harassment had returned and was every bit as strong as before.

LM: [My youngest brother] is a senior now, and he tells me every day Columbine is worse than it's ever been, ever.

DL: In what respect?

LM: In every respect.

JN: Which is scary because my brother graduated in 2001, and he said it was the worst it's ever been.

LM: My brother comes home with new stories every day (Recorded April 30, 2004).

This was corroborated in a story in *Newsweek* magazine on Columbine High School's returned to normality (Meadows 2003), that stated, "One indication that the school is reaching a new normality is that bullying is back" (57).

As much as Columbine High School and the community it served were culturally reminiscent of the 1950s, the intrusion of postmodern culture created anomalies and contradictions. In an interview with a former Columbine student who transferred out prior to the shootings, the following conversation transpired:

RL: So what were your most memorable experiences at Columbine?

ED: Ahh ... memorable experiences?

RL: Either positive or negative.

ED: There were a lot of them that I've actually been trying to forget most of them, because it's ... I'm sure that like most people's high school experiences, it wasn't pleasant.

RL: What wasn't pleasant?

ED: The complete lack of respect that people show, which I know is standard in all high schools, but I'm not certain if it's standard for the faculty to show that little respect.

RL: To you personally, or just generally?

ED: To anybody who didn't have, who didn't quite fit [in]. ...

RL: How'd you find the academic program?

ED: I thought it was absolutely atrocious.

RL: Why?

ED: Because it seemed to me that they taught everybody at the lowest common denominator. They found the slowest learner, and taught at that level (Recorded April 10, 2003).

This was not the only time that students indicated that they felt they were not respected as members of the Columbine community. An evangelical Christian student related the following:

I've been bullied by more in high school, it's not my peers, and it's not by kids who don't like me, it's by teachers. Maybe it's because I would say [I was] an outspoken kid, but I would say a lot of us, teachers rip you apart. I walked into philosophy the first day: "So, isn't anybody going to tell me they're Christian. Isn't anybody going to tell me that God is what's ultimately real?" And he just went on. And then I had a history teacher that was the same way... . It's like I've learned to be able to go up to that teacher and say, "Listen. During class I didn't feel that you were very fair towards me," and you know that teacher might talk and I was always wrong... . I've had meetings with the principal and teachers, and I still came out wrong, even though it's plain and clear that I'm right. I've had a teacher say in front of myself and my parents and the principal, he said, "I just don't—you know, you're a great kid in your work. I just don't like the way that you live." He said that, and he still has his job. (Recorded May 12, 2003)

The vast majority of Columbine High School students were typical upper-middle-class white students who essentially conformed to the norms of the school. This status pyramid pretty much replicated those of other high schools (Wooden and Blazak, 2001). At the top were athletes and "soches," the popular students who ascended in the peer culture by virtue of athletic feats, physical attractiveness, family status, social skills, and clique membership. In the middle was a vast agglomeration of students differentiated from each other by neighborhood, interests, participation in school clubs and activities, academic achievement, rock-and-roll music tastes, and so forth. At the bottom was a miniscule collection of

outcast students: stoners and goths, the latter group consisting of fewer than twenty students.

RL: So let me ask you this: In Columbine High School—you described yourself as kind of an outcast—and there are a number of high school outcast subcultures—what proportion of the student body at Columbine when you were there would you consider members of the disaffected students, the kids who were outcasts? The school has about 2,000 students in it. About how many students would you say didn't fit into the mold?

ED: Didn't want to be or refused to be?

RL: Refused to be... .

ED: I'd have to say less than 1 percent. Maybe, when I was there, there were 1800 students. There were maybe, maybe a dozen people that fit in that category... . I always thought it was very ironic that the mascot for Columbine was the Rebels because they demand absolute conformity (Recorded April 10, 2003).

Numerous students corroborated the observation of ED: the outcast student population at Columbine High School was minuscule. Although very small relative to the student population, their presence tended to be discomforting to the majority of students, the administration, and a great many of the faculty, with the exception of certain teachers who welcomed them. One student noted:

Because the loser kids, if we liked the teacher, you can ask the teacher like Ms. A, Mr. X, Mr. B, and Mrs. C. You can ask any of those teachers [about loser kids]. They were the ones who were loved by the loser kids (April 30, 2003).

Thus, within Columbine High School was a very small subculture of disaffected students. To the credit of the faculty, these students, such as ED and others like him who saw themselves as intellectuals not willing to conform to the expectations of the majority, were able to find teachers who liked them and offered support. However, within the mainstream of Columbine High School, nonconforming students were perceived as a blot on the reputation of the high school. They did not fit in, and they did not want to fit in. Their presence made others feel uncomfortable. For some evangelical students, this small group was perceived as evidence of evil.

SPORTS AT COLUMBINE

For the first twenty years that Columbine High School existed, its sports history was fairly typical. As Stark (1999) characterized it, “There were some state champion soccer teams. . . .” Apart from its outstanding boy’s soccer program, in which Columbine teams were always at or near the top of their league and had won several state championships, some teams were good, some were bad, and most were mediocre. This was especially true of the football team. However, in the mid-1990s, at about the time that Frank DeAngelis was appointed principal, Columbine High School emerged as a major power not only in soccer but in football, basketball, and wrestling. DeAngelis, who was a social studies teacher prior to his promotion to principal, had been head coach of the baseball team, which had won state championships in 1987 and in 1991. According to Pendergast (1999), the school won thirty-two state sports championships in the 1990s.

Columbine won its first football state championship in the fall of 1999, the season following the shootings. The victory rally was portrayed in the media as bittersweet (Enlissen 1999). The football team, which had comeback victories from fourteen-point deficits in both the quarterfinal and championship games, was used by Principal DeAngelis as a metaphor for the school as a whole in their struggle to overcome the tragedy of the shootings. They persevered against adversity. DeAngelis said, “This team never quit. . . . It’s about not giving up and that’s what Columbine High School represents” (Enlissen 1999).

The Columbine Rebel football team won its second state championship in the fall of 2000. The victory was considered by many to be a part of the healing process (Enlissen 1999). In the following year, Columbine placed second in the Jefferson County 5A conference behind its sister school, Chatfield High, which won. In 2002, Columbine won the state championship with a perfect 14-0 record, and was ranked twenty-second in the United States, an accomplishment that made the front page of the sports section of the *New York Times*. Principal DeAngelis was quoted in the article:

The team and the school and the community at large had every reason to quit, to give up, to descend into total despair, but we’ve come out of it to a great degree. The fact is, we’ll never be totally back to normal. How can we be? We had every reason to quit, but we didn’t let that happen. We showed amazing resolve and resilience, and maybe, in some way, we’ve given faith to others, who saw how we responded (Berkow 2003, 26 September : D1–D5).

The success of the football team and its national exposure were popularly characterized as evidence that Columbine had successfully transcended the tragedies of the shootings (Berkow 2003; Meadows 2003). The grit, determination, talent, and success of not just the football team but the entire athletic program seem to give Columbine the aura of success.

THE HIGH SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY

Southern Jefferson County was mistakenly identified as “Littleton” in the media. The Columbine shootings were described in the major media as “Terror in Littleton” (Stout 1999). Local media, such as the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Denver Post*, did not make the mistake of identifying Columbine High School with Littleton. Although the closest incorporated community to Columbine, Littleton is not even in the same county. News reports were filed from Littleton because the United States Postal Service identifies that area as part of the Littleton postal zone.

The area in Southern Jefferson County that this researcher has identified as Columbine has no collective identity. It is nothing more than a series of residential developments, strip malls, and shopping centers. A pastor whose life was spent primarily in the Northeast and Midwest characterized the area as follows:

You could not find community. And the only glue in South Jefferson County was Southwest Mall. . . . So that was the only sense of community, but there's no official [government] down there. It's unincorporated. So, I mean they can't have a parade anywhere because there's no place to coalesce. So that was kind of goofy. So, it's different getting used to the west. The selfishness in the west is unbelievable. Like Wyoming's barbaric, and Colorado isn't that much better (Recorded April 29, 2004).

Churches, however large, cannot provide a region with a collective identity. Even large churches are too small; congregations cross neighborhoods. Proximity, social networks, and small ideological differences distinguish various congregations. Although the shopping mall may be a focal point of the area, people come to it as consumers in small groups and as isolated individuals. The mall does not provide a sense of collective identity. It is a place of commerce and not much else.

The only institutions that provide a sense of collective identity are the high schools. Many high schools that cater to an upper-middle-class suburban student

population maintain strong academic programs. However, academics do not provide schools with a great deal of visibility. More than anything else, the football team gives a high school, and consequently its community, visibility. When the Columbine High School Rebel football team won the state championship in 2003, the team was featured as the lead article on the front page of the *New York Times* sports section (Berkow 2003) and in a feature article in *Newsweek* magazine (Meadows 2003). The championship game was attended by 7,500 spectators. Perhaps not as impressive as the 10,000 to 15,000 average attendance at Permian High School, perennial high school state champion contender in Odessa, Texas, population 94,000, reputed to be the most sports-crazed city in the country (Bissinger 1990), but certainly respectable.

Southern Jefferson County has no collective identity outside of Columbine High School. Nothing else distinguishes it from the thousands of suburbs ringing urban cores. Much to the dismay of its inhabitants, it is known to the rest of America as the place where the largest school massacre in American history took place. From the ashes of the Columbine shootings has emerged a successful football program that provides a more positive image of the school and the community. Principal Frank DeAngelis is the prime articulator of the spirit, resolve, and desire of the community to present a positive face of a dedicated, hard-working, religious, tolerant, and quintessentially American community.