

Manes: 'I made a bad mistake'
Seller of gun says he had no idea Harris, Klebold dangerous

By Heather Pitzel, Rocky Mountain News
April 19, 2004

Mark Manes stops eating his lunch and tenses up when the waitress interrupts to ask his name and where he went to high school.

Her co-worker might know him, the waitress explains.

He tells her he went to Columbine. As she walks away, Manes and his girlfriend, Jessica Miklich, exchange glances with eyebrows raised.

The co-worker comes over, and, as it turns out, he's an old acquaintance. Manes laughs and relaxes.

But he had good reason to be wary. It isn't the first time someone has recognized him because of his connection to Columbine, and it isn't always so pleasant.

To the public, Manes is the guy who sold one of the guns to the Columbine killers. It will be five years ago Tuesday that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 fellow students and a teacher and wounded 23 others before killing themselves at Columbine High School.

To law enforcement, Manes is an example to deter illegal gun sales. To his lawyer, Manes is a scapegoat because the dead killers couldn't be prosecuted.

To victims' families, Manes is partly responsible for what happened to their loved ones that day.

Manes, now 27, sees himself as a man whose life imploded because of one bad decision.

In one of his few interviews since Columbine, Manes says that he got off track in his teen-age years, doing drugs and getting in trouble with the law. He compiled a lengthy record of offenses from underage drinking to vandalizing bulldozers.

By age 21, he thought his troubled years were behind him. He had gotten off drugs. He had begun working as a software developer and had started dating Miklich, who was 19.

Then he sold Klebold and Harris a TEC-DC9, a semiautomatic handgun, for \$500. The two were 17 years old, making the sale illegal.

Manes says that in the first year after the killings, he and Miklich had nightmares about it. He's gone through the puzzle of events piece by piece, trying to see how things could have come together differently.

"If I had really thought about whether he (Klebold) was 18, maybe nothing would've been different," he says, "but it would've been legal."

Manes says he had no idea what the killers intended, and the Jefferson County sheriff's investigation concluded that was true.

Seven months after Columbine, Manes was sentenced to six years in state prison for selling a gun to a minor.

Phil Duran, a friend of Manes' who acted as middleman in the sale, served almost 3 years of a 4 -year

sentence on the same charges and was paroled Nov. 8, 2003.

Manes served about 19 months in the Huerfano and Sterling correctional facilities before he was released in June 2001 to a halfway house in Lakewood.

A young couple starting out

Since February 2002, Manes has been allowed to live on his own, but he is required to wear an ankle monitor 24 hours a day, among other restrictions. He has been denied parole three times, but his mandatory release date for parole is in May.

He has returned to computer programming for his former employer, where he says co-workers have been supportive. He lives with 24-year-old Miklich, whom he started dating two months before Columbine.

The inside of their rented white house on a cul-de-sac in Lakewood looks like the home of a couple just starting out: a hand-me-down, avocado-green velveteen chair and a gray couch, a framed collage of family pictures on the wall next to a frameless Kandinsky poster. A pack of Camel Lights lies on the black coffee table.

Miklich is working on her undergraduate degree at Metropolitan State College, hoping to become a literature or history professor someday. As she sits on the couch and talks about the past, her almost constant smile fades.

"Visiting Mark in prison, having to leave him there, was one of the hardest things in life," she says. "When he got out, I had to get to know him again. . . . I was always really proud of Mark and proud to stand by him. I was really depressed for a while. I feel really lucky now; it strengthened our bond."

'Never socially accepted'

Manes, a lanky 6 feet 7 inches tall with long, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, sits in his living room, trying to calm their dog, Heidi. He speaks slowly in low tones about how he ended up in a courtroom after Columbine.

He grew up in a middle-class home in Littleton with two adopted older brothers who are developmentally disabled. They commanded much of his parents' time. According to the probation department's report to court, Manes, who wasn't adopted, "began to test boundaries at home as a way of gaining attention from his parents."

Eventually he turned to mischief, drugs and the wrong kind of friends.

"I still toss around why I ever went in that direction," Manes says. "I was never socially accepted. . . . I got beat up all the time."

During Manes' freshman year at Columbine, Phil Duran moved in down the street, and they became best friends, except for the period when Manes was doing drugs. Duran didn't approve of that.

By the time Manes met the Columbine killers, he had moved past the drug scene.

A job offer as a software developer had prompted him to quit drugs and make a fresh start. After a two-week family trip to Europe, he had quit Arapahoe Community College, where he carried almost a 3.6 grade point average. He moved in with his parents, broke ties with his former life and started his new job.

His interest in guns, however, had just begun. At the age of 20, he made friends who enjoyed camping and hunting, and that sparked his interest in firearms. Manes bought the TEC-DC9 for \$500 at the first gun show he attended in August 1998 and practiced shooting it on camping trips.

Duran, meanwhile, was working with Klebold and Harris at a Blackjack Pizza shop. He introduced them to Manes at a gun show in Denver because they wanted to buy his TEC-DC9.

"At the gun show, I asked Phil if they were cool," Manes says. "They were computer guys like me, and ahead of me at that age."

Manes found a booth with the type of gun he was selling to show the boys what it looked like.

Had the sale not happened, he says, he would have placed an ad in the paper. He considered the gun a piece of junk.

Klebold asked to pay \$300 at the time and the rest later. Because customers must be 18 to get into gun shows and Klebold and Harris were high school seniors, Manes says their age didn't cross his mind.

"Dylan came over that night. It's the first time I really talked to him," Manes says. "He was already working with Linux, an advanced computer operating system, and he was in high school. They needed to wait for their next paycheck to give me the other \$200. A few weeks went by, and they gave it to Phil."

Manes and his friends regularly went shooting in the woods, so that night he extended an invitation to Klebold for him and Harris to go along. And they did several times over the next few months.

On March 6, 1999, the only time they videotaped themselves shooting guns, Klebold and Harris told Manes they had a surprise. It was the sawed-off shotguns they would use at Columbine.

"Every time we went shooting," Manes says, "we would see three or four other groups doing the same type of thing. It's really not as unusual as it was made out to be."

The videotape shows Klebold and Harris clowning around. At one point, Klebold looks at a bullet hole in a tree trunk and says, "Imagine that in someone's f----- brain."

But Manes says he had no idea that Klebold and Harris were dangerous.

Miklich accompanied Manes on weekly shooting excursions, including the videotaped trip. That was the first time she met the killers.

"I don't want to say they were nondescript," she says. "They were nice enough, but not enough to start a conversation. We had no connection after (shooting in the woods). They seemed a little weird, but they were just boys. I was only two years removed from their age. They seemed like boys playing their war games."

On April 20, 1999, those war games turned into real carnage.

'I just freaked'

Manes says Duran, who was working for a cable company by that time, called him at work from Chicago. Duran had two younger siblings at Columbine: Simon, a sophomore, and Julia, a senior.

"Phil said, 'My sister says she thinks it's Dylan and Eric. Go to -ABCNews.com.' I just freaked," Manes

says. "He asked, 'You think they're using your TEC-9?' Why wouldn't they? I was smoking cigarettes frantically."

The day of Columbine was the -second anniversary of the death of one of Miklich's friends in a car accident. Miklich had planned a day of meditation, driving to the mountains and going to the cemetery.

She was driving when she heard on the radio what was going on at the high school. She didn't call Manes until about 7 p.m. because she didn't connect him to Columbine.

"He was completely devastated," she says. "He said, 'I need you. Do you remember those people we went shooting with?' "

He told his parents that day, and they counseled him to get a lawyer.

Within two weeks, authorities with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives contacted Manes. He says he remembers because it was the day he met for a second time with a lawyer.

When the arrest warrant was issued May 3, 1999, Manes turned himself in. His parents bailed him out and helped him dodge the horde of cameras and reporters awaiting him outside the sheriff's department. They dropped him off at a -hotel, he says, where he stayed while media camped in front of his -parents' home for two days.

"From April until November (when he was sentenced), I was the target of everyone's rage," Manes says. "Media coverage was all negative. I was really frustrated."

He felt the public's misperception of him grew and the grieving families' anger was inflamed.

"I definitely have a lot of sympathy for what they're going through. I can't even imagine what it's like," he says. "I have this feeling I'm their enemy."

Miklich says it was difficult to see Manes being vilified by the media and to hear the families' anger directed at him.

"One woman said Mark should be shot in every place her son was shot," Miklich says.

The type of gun Manes sold had been banned from manufacture as an assault weapon in 1994. The gun could be sold at retail stores or in private sales, but couldn't be legally purchased from a firearms dealer by anyone under 21 or from a private seller by anyone under 18.

Manes pleaded guilty in Jefferson County District Court to two felonies - providing a gun to a minor and illegal possession of a sawed-off shotgun. The second charge was filed because Manes had fired Klebold's and Harris' sawed-off shotguns in the woods at Rampart Range.

Jefferson County District Judge Henry Nieto sentenced Manes in November 1999 to three years for the possession charge, which ran concurrently with the six-year sentence for selling a gun to a minor.

Manes' attorney, Robert Ransome, maintains that his client was made a scapegoat.

Although Klebold was 17 when he died, Harris had turned 18 on April 9, before Columbine. That meant Harris legally could have bought the guns used at Columbine.

Manes took full responsibility for selling the gun, Ransome says, and didn't waste taxpayer money on

a trial that would have prolonged the families' grief.

"Mark took the high road in this case," Ransome says.

A grieving parent's view

Tom Mauser, who lost his son, Daniel, at Columbine and has become a gun-control activist, thought at the time that Manes' sentence was appropriate, though he says he thinks that other victims' families had harsher feelings.

But after seeing the video of Manes and the killers when it was released to the public in October 2003, Mauser says a longer sentence may have been appropriate. The video raised questions for Mauser about whether Manes and Duran, who went shooting three times with the killers, had an inkling that Klebold and Harris were unstable.

"Or did Manes and Duran ignore clues, rationalize them away?" he says.

"Saying 'I'm sorry' at sentencing isn't worth anything," Mauser says. "Who doesn't say they're sorry when their ass is on the line?"

On the third anniversary of Columbine, before seeing the video, Mauser wrote on Daniel's memorial Web site about the need for reconciliation, for the killers' families, victims' families and law enforcement to gather and acknowledge the harm done to one another.

Two years later Mauser still wants a public forum for discussion. He would like to hear from Manes and Duran to help the community learn from what happened.

"Prison is punishment - society's punishment," Mauser says. "Redemption is what you do with your life after prison. They could talk to kids about the dangers of guns."

Manes is under court order not to speak to the victims or their families. Until recently, Ransome had counseled Manes not to speak to the press.

"Mark's very shy and quiet. . . . It's always a risk when a client opens his mouth," Ransome says. "It's the safer route not to talk. He didn't want to, and it wasn't a safe route. Now those decisions are his, not mine."

Manes doesn't see himself going around to schools to talk to kids.

"I wouldn't have had a problem doing community service had it been ordered," he says. "Doing my sentence was a big community service. I taught computer classes to inmates and helped the chaplain. I've never been one for public speaking."

Manes says he meant it when he spoke at his sentencing about how distraught and sorry he was.

"There's not anything I could have said that would have made anybody happy," he says. "It was really hard to get up there. It was honest. Selling the gun was a stupid thing to do."

His sentencing day was probably the worst day of his life, Manes says.

"It was two hours of being blamed for the deaths of all these children, everyone pushing for life sentences or death. It was solely vengeance. It wasn't ever punishment. It was vengeance for their children's deaths. I understand that anger is one of the first stages of grieving. But media involvement really pulled that anger out until someone paid for it."

Judge Nieto, who is now on the Colorado Court of Appeals, declined to be interviewed.

Duran and his attorney, Matt DePetro, also declined interviews.

Until the day before sentencing, Manes says he thought he might not go to prison at all. He hadn't had any legal troubles for two years, and the most recent three were for a -minor possessing alcohol when he was 18, 19 and 20 years old, according to court documents.

Probation officer Marianne Rayburn wrote in her report to the court that psychological testing showed Manes wasn't a threat to society. She recommended probation, but said county jail time and community service were warranted based on the seriousness of the case.

Steve Jensen, who has a reputation as one of Jefferson County's toughest prosecutors, says that Manes' and Duran's sentences were among the most emotional for him in his 19 years as a prosecutor. The sentences were appropriate, he says.

"If we're not going to ask for a tough sentence in this case, I ask you, in what case would we ask for a tough sentence?" Jensen says. "It's difficult to conceive of more terror, more angst, than that caused in this community."

He says he could have asked for as much as 18 years, "but he probably wouldn't have gotten it."

A primary function of a sentence is deterrence, Jensen says, both for the defendant and the public.

Jensen says he wants people to think of Manes and Duran before giving a gun to a juvenile.

"If everyone had said no," Jensen says, "then possibly, possibly, this wouldn't have happened."

The other three guns used by the killers came from Robyn Anderson, who attended Columbine and went to prom with Klebold. She bought one gun for Klebold and two for Harris at a gun show. The transfer of such long-arm guns to juveniles wasn't illegal then, though it is now.

Anderson had no clue that the teens would use the gun for a shooting rampage, says her attorney, Richard Everstine. "No one did."

Richard Weatherbee, law enforcement coordinator for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Denver, says that Manes was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"The two people who should have been prosecuted were dead before we even knew who they were," he says. "It's like, 'OK, who do we go after next?' Maybe that's wrong, but the reality is when you have horrendous crimes like this, people want to see justice done."

Miklich admits that she worried after Columbine that she also might face possession charges because she was in the video shooting the -killers' sawed-off shotguns.

She was given immunity because her testimony would have been needed to authenticate the videotape in case of a trial.

'Guns are too final'

Miklich says she remembers feeling powerful when she shot guns years ago. But now she thinks society would be better off without guns, even for police officers.

"People are too erratic, and guns are too final," she says.

Manes' views on guns have changed, too.

"They did the right thing by upping the age limits on guns, though I wouldn't have thought so at 18," he says. "At 15 you can get prosecuted as an adult for crimes. At 18, you can shoot a gun in the Army, but you can't buy one. They need to pick a number and stick with it, be more consistent."

Manes says he may always be known as that guy from the Columbine case. He hopes not.

He has no plans for the fifth anniversary of Columbine on Tuesday. He and Miklich tend to fill their weekends with the mundane. He cuts the grass, rides his burgundy Yamaha motorcycle. She studies.

He has a 10 p.m. curfew and cannot drink alcohol or have credit cards, a cell phone or a checking account.

He pays his bills with money -orders.

His interest in guns has been replaced with a passion for model airplanes and helicopters, which he sometimes flies in the house. When he was first released, he preferred staying at home.

"I felt like I'd be recognized wherever I went. One of the most awkward situations was while I was getting insurance. There was a TV on in the background with a story about me getting out. The woman was rude after that," Manes says.

"At some points, I've broken down crying," Manes says, "but there was really no way I could've known.... I made a bad mistake in selling a gun."