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Parents question DA's role in TV program

Columbine shootings focus of A&E network's 'Investigative Reports'

By Lynn Bartels and Owen Good, News Staff Writers
April 1, 2002

Columbine parents Randy and Judy Brown want to know the extent of the district attorney's involvement in a television program about the Columbine shootings.

The Browns said they received a letter from Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas inviting them to participate in the documentary, which follows a California-based company as it conducts "psychiatric autopsies" on the Columbine killers.

The Browns said they plan to appear before a Columbine task force that meets today and ask for copies of all documents and photos the district attorney and sheriff may have provided A&E's *Investigative Reports*.

"We are concerned and curious to know how much information Dave Thomas released to A&E," Randy Brown said. "I think it's very odd that he's leaving the investigation up to A&E."

The Browns are among the Columbine families who have been critical of the district attorney's and sheriff's handling of events leading up to Columbine and the investigation into the shootings.

The Browns said they didn't keep a copy of Thomas' letter, which they received after the April 20, 1999, shootings. They said they assumed they received it because they knew the gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

Thomas could not be reached for comment.

Columbine: Understanding Why is scheduled to air April 15.

The network examines the work of the Threat Assessment Group. According to its Web site, the group offers specialized services and information products designed to "reduce losses due to violent, criminal or mentally disordered behavior."

The network won't say what conclusions the group reached, but the program revisits much of what already is known about the high school seniors: They made a video for a class in which students are killed; they believed they were bullied and alienated at a school that worshipped jocks; Harris posted his intent on the Internet.

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Controversy dogs Columbine board

Open records task force mired in debate over makeup of panel, proposed addition of Jeffco critic

By Kevin Vaughan, News Staff Writer
April 2, 2002

Another Columbine controversy flared Monday, this time over suggestions that a longtime Jefferson County critic be added to a panel trying to uncover records in the case.

The debate centered on Randy Brown -- who has battled publicly with Jefferson County officials -- and on the makeup of the open records task force.

In the face of such discord, some Columbine parents are questioning the panel's ability to accomplish anything.

"It's a dog and pony show," said Rich Petrone, stepfather of murdered student Dan Rohrbough.

Attorney General Ken Salazar and Dave Thomas, district attorney for Jefferson and Gilpin counties, created the task force to address lingering questions about the Columbine tragedy, including charges that some documents compiled by investigators have been kept from the public.

Several families pointed to Brown as one of the few people who has read the approximately 16,000 pages of Columbine material released so far. They said he would ask the right questions about what was still locked away in the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office.

"His only bias is the truth," said Brian Rohrbough, Dan's father.

But the suggestion grew into heated talk after Kathy Sasak, assistant district attorney in Jefferson County and the co-chairwoman of the task force, said the families of some victims -- who she did not name -- had objected to Brown's addition to the group.

Petrone seized on that to question the inclusion of three members on the panel -- Sasak, Kate Battan, lead Columbine investigator, and Lily Oeffler, assistant Jefferson County attorney.

"Lily," Petrone said to Oeffler, "I don't understand you being here, because if Randy Brown is a conflict, you are, Kate is, the DA's office is."

Jefferson County officials have their own interests -- not those of victims -- at heart, he charged.

The open records panel has written to 41 agencies that were involved in the Columbine investigation, asking that they inventory their records. The group also planned a meeting, possibly on April 16, with the families of Columbine victims. And they took under advisement a list of 59 kinds of documents that Brown has been seeking.

But the makeup of the task force dominated the meeting.

Some families had earlier complained about the decision to include Jefferson County officials on the panel.



George Kochanec Jr. © News

Rich Petrone, the stepfather of murdered Columbine student Dan Rohrbough, talks Monday before the open records task force. Petrone was among those arguing for the inclusion of parent Randy Brown on the task force. Brown has long been a critic of Jefferson County's handling of Columbine tragedy.

Oeffler, for example, has represented Jefferson County in court cases brought by families and the media in efforts to obtain documents.

Those complaints led Salazar and Thomas to add John Ireland to the panel. Ireland's son, Patrick, was wounded in the Columbine library.

Dawn Anna, whose daughter, Laruen Townsend, was murdered in the Columbine library, also was asked to join the panel, but she declined.

She hadn't read everything that had been released, she said, and she wasn't qualified. But she said Brown was.

Brown and his wife, Judy, first reported to sheriff's officials in March 1998 that Harris had threatened to kill their son, Brooks, and that Harris had written about pipe bombs and mass murder on his web site. After Columbine, they quarrelled with officials when Sheriff John Stone named their son as a potential suspect in the case. In December 1999, the sheriff's office cleared Brooks Brown of involvement.

The Browns have raised numerous questions about inconsistencies in official documents.

Monday was no exception as Randy Brown pointed to a large map of the Columbine crime scene that includes reference numbers he has not been able to find in the documents released so far. He also criticized county officials for not releasing a copy of the map.

Oeffler said the county had been unable to accurately copy it.

"I have Kinkos' number," Brown shot back.

Later, Brown was asked if he would serve on the panel if he was asked.

"They won't ask," he said.

Salazar and Thomas have the final say on any new task force members.

The two hope to appoint at least one more member -- most likely someone who lost a loved one at Columbine.

The attorney general's and district attorney's offices said they were not frustrated by ongoing questions about the panel's makeup.

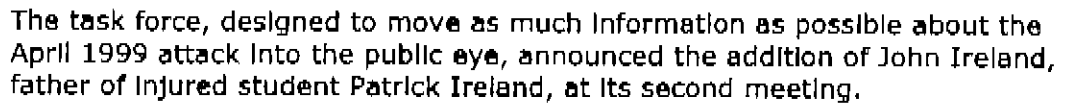
"Is it a perfect task force? No. It is evolving," said Ken Lane, spokesman for the attorney general.

News staff writer Jeff Kass contributed to this story.

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Speakers want probe's critics on panel, too

Tuesday, April 02, 2002 - The Columbine public records review task force added one Injured victim's father to the panel and invited the mother of a girl slain in the school shooting to join the group, but took heat Monday for failing to add well-versed critics of the investigation.



"They can short-cut for you where you need to be looking," said Anna in declining the offer. "You're just not going to see the goal with one eye closed."

Brown reported threats made by gunman Eric Harris against his son, Brooks, a year before the shootings, but Jefferson County authorities never followed through on them. Then, immediately after the shooting, Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone publicly named Brooks Brown as a suspect, though he later backed off that statement.

Columbine Public Records Review Task Force

Alan Gilbert, co-chair,
Solicitor general, Office of
the Attorney General

Panel co-chairman Alan Gilbert, the state solicitor general, said Brown's

John Ireland, father of
Injured Columbine victim
Patrick Ireland

The panel tentatively has scheduled time to meet separately with family members of the victims on April 15 at a time and place yet to be determined. The task force scheduled its next public meeting for 10 a.m. on April 22 at the attorney general's office, 1525 Sherman St., in Denver.

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Stone won't seek re-election

Weary of fallout from Columbine, Stone will finish out his once 'dream job'

By Charley Able, News Staff Writer
April 6, 2002

GOLDEN -- Calling Columbine "a tar baby" he couldn't shake, embattled Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone has decided not to seek re-election to the office he has held since shortly before the April 20, 1999, tragedy.

Stone broke the news to his staff Friday in what was described as an "emotional" meeting. He previously had revealed his decision to a handful of supporters but didn't want to make it public until after meeting with his administrative staff.

Stone told the *Rocky Mountain News* he has not decided what to do after he leaves office in January.

"I'm going to finish my term out and then re-evaluate things," he said.

The first-term sheriff said dealing with the aftermath of the nation's deadliest school shooting had taken a toll on him and his family.

"This was a dream job, but these last three years have just been a living hell," he said. "It just has been a very difficult time."

Stone is confident he could have won re-election.

"But even if I win it, I don't win because these people won't leave me alone."

Stone was elected sheriff Nov. 3, 1998, taking 54 percent of the vote.

But just five months later, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold launched an attack at Columbine High School, killing 12 of their classmates and a teacher before they committed suicide.

The mass killings unleashed a torrent of criticism that since has dogged the sheriff and his department.

Stone characterized it this way:

"You've got a tar baby that no matter who touched it, they are not going to walk away from it," he said. "I still think we did everything we could do (at Columbine) under impossible circumstances and by the rules -- as the rules were at that time."

Judy and Randy Brown, whose son Brooks had been threatened by Harris, launched an unsuccessful campaign to recall Stone in February 2000.

"His arrogance has been unbelievable to us. It is about time he admitted to himself that the people of Jeffco don't want a man who is so deceitful and lacking in character as John P. Stone," the Browns said in a joint statement.

Eventually, the families of 17 Columbine victims sued Stone, his deputies and the county, claiming they failed to prevent the attack despite indications that Harris and Klebold posed a danger.

The family of slain student Daniel Lee Rohrbough is among those who sued Stone in connection with the school rampage. Daniel's father, Brian Rohrbough, has been a frequent critic of the sheriff.

"I don't think John Stone had a chance to win re-election. He was never qualified to be sheriff in the first place and his behavior during Columbine and since has left no doubt whatsoever that he should not be in that position," Rohrbough said.

The lawsuits, filed in federal court, also claimed Stone's department mishandled the law enforcement response by waiting outside the school for hours on the day of the attack instead of entering the school and stopping Klebold and Harris.

A timeline issued by Stone's investigators months after the attack suggested the two young gunmen already were dead before officers could mount an effective response.

Nearly all the claims in the lawsuits have been dismissed.

Supporters of Stone, who served three terms as county commissioner from the beginning of 1987 until year's end in 1998, praised his service to the county, but acknowledged a campaign for a second term would have put Stone on the defensive because of Columbine-related issues.

"It is probably for the best, especially John and his family," said Michelle Lawrence, who chairs the Board of County Commissioners. "I served with John as a commissioner and worked with him as our sheriff. He's given a lot of himself to the community over the years, and I respect him for that.

"If John were to run again this year, the entire focus would be on Columbine and there is so much more to the Sheriff's Office than just Columbine. Columbine was a terrible occurrence for the children and the families and the entire community, but it has been almost three years and we need to move ahead and look ahead at what we need for our Sheriff's Office and the kind of leadership we need."

Jim Johnson, a longtime political supporter and campaign officer for Stone, said the sheriff's loyalty to his deputies figured strongly in Stone's decision not to run.

"I know this is a hard decision for him. He had some things he wanted to get done and would have liked to run one more time, but I think he is looking out for what is best for the department," Johnson said.

"A big part of why he is stepping down is he is getting tired of them (critics) pointing the finger at Jefferson County. He has so many good troops out there that he just felt bad and that, if they are taking more guff over him, he would get out of the game and give those guys a fair shot going forward.

"This whole Columbine thing has been hard on him. I know every night when he goes to bed he thinks 'What could we have done, how could we have done it differently?' It has haunted him as well as everybody else."

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Jefferson County sheriff candidates

April 6, 2002

The Jefferson County Clerk's Office lists 10 candidates for sheriff: nine Republicans and one Democrat:

- Sigfredo "Fred" Ramirez (Republican)
- Roger Hoffner (Republican)
- Russell L. Cook (Republican)
- George B. Mumma Jr. (Republican)*
- Larry L. Chamberlain (Republican)*
- Michael L. Bliss (Republican)
- Brett Lee Almy (Democrat)
- Jim Congrove (Republican)*
- Richard A. Wyatt Jr. (Republican)
- Steve Schweltzberger (Republican)

* Has withdrawn from the race, but remains on the county's official list of candidates.

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John Stone's career

April 6, 2002

Nov. 3, 1998 -- After three terms as a Jefferson County commissioner, Stone was elected as Jefferson County sheriff with 54 percent of the vote over Arvada police Cmdr. Ted Mink.

April 20, 1999 -- Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold kill 12 students and one teacher inside Columbine High School. Stone was criticized for not quickly storming the school and possibly saving lives.

May 3, 1999 -- Stone publicly said he was suspicious of Brooks Brown's relationship with Klebold and Harris. The sheriff's department then went on to say that his parents, Randy and Judy Brown, had never met with investigators about Harris' violent tendencies, as they claimed they did a year before the shootings. Red-faced sheriff's officials later said they had.

Dec. 12, 1999 -- Stone incurred the wrath of Columbine families by allowing a *Time* magazine reporter to watch videos taped by Klebold and Harris after refusing to let the families see them. The Dec. 20, 1999, issue of the magazine featured Stone and Undersheriff John Dunaway posing for a photograph with three of the four weapons the killers used.

Aug. 3, 2000 -- After two months, an effort to collect signatures to recall Stone, headed by Randy and Judy Brown, ended without success.

Nov. 21, 2000 -- The Jefferson County sheriff's office released 11,000 pages of investigative files on the attack at Columbine High on a judge's order.

April 6, 2001 -- Sheriff's officials were ordered to release a long-secret draft affidavit that had been drawn up in an effort to search Eric Harris' home a year before the Columbine tragedy.

May 18, 2001 -- A commission appointed by Gov. Bill Owens to review the Columbine shootings delivered a report critical of Stone. "He provided no information and stonewalled our commission," said former Colorado Supreme Court Chief Justice William Erickson, the commission chairman.

Compiled by News Librarian Carol Kosel.

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Columbine proposal taps earlier panel

Lawmaker says probe wouldn't start from scratch

By Trent Selbert
Denver Post Capitol Bureau

Tuesday, April 09, 2002 - The sponsor of a plan to probe the Columbine investigation said Monday that he wants the inquiry to be aided by an advisory committee that includes an educator, a law officer and a member of the news media.

Rep. Don Lee, R-Littleton, also told The Denver Post's editorial board he hopes members of the now-disbanded Governor's Columbine Review Commission would sit on the advisory panel.

Lee, who represents the district in which Columbine High School sits, said Gov. Bill Owens' commission was not successful because it lacked subpoena powers. Since key law enforcement officers refused to testify, questions remain unanswered, he said.

Lee's plan calls for a legislative commission with subpoena power to lead the probe, with assistance from the advisory committee, he said. "There are omissions we need answers for," Lee said.

Lee said he wants to tap members of the governor's review commission because they are familiar with the Columbine tragedy and the information previously gathered.

That way, Lee's six-member bipartisan investigative commission on which lawmakers from both the House and the Senate will sit won't start from scratch, he said.

Lee's proposal, House Bill 1418, will be debated a week from today before the House State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committee.

This is Lee's second attempt to probe the police investigation surrounding the 1999 high school massacre that left 15 people dead and about two dozen wounded.

His initial proposal was defeated by a House committee March 7 on a 7-2 bipartisan vote. Critics questioned whether Lee's probe was too broad. They also raised questions about the probe's potential cost, since lawmakers are facing the tightest budget in years.

Lee's new plan is streamlined, focusing on three main questions:

What can be learned from the law-enforcement response on April 20, 1999, in preparation for another similar attack?

What can be learned from the response to the complaint filed with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office alleging that gunman Eric Harris was making death threats over the Internet?

What can be learned in regard to destructive behavior exhibited in the school environment by the perpetrators in the time leading up to the attack?

Lee also said his new probe would not cost the state a dime since he's seeking a group to provide donations to pay its costs, and it is close to lining up donors. Legislative analysts had estimated the probe's price tag at \$300,000.