

Reflections on the Littleton Massacre

BY HUGH COYLE

In the days and weeks that followed the recent killing spree at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, news analysts, civic leaders, and politicians alike pointed fingers in every direction as they struggled to explain it. Violent movies, video games, the Internet, and alternative music all came under fire (pardon the metaphor), with the most attention paid to weapons availability and gun control (or lack thereof).

At some point, I knew, the religious right would probably try to pin at least some of the blame on homosexuality; after all, they've made gays and les-

bians scapegoats for nearly every other tragedy befalling our country. Sure enough, protesters at some of the memorials for Littleton victims carried signs with slogans such as "Fags Killed Them."

Then, while standing in the checkout line at a supermarket recently, I noticed a *National Enquirer* headline proclaiming inside information about Klebold and Harris and "the gay secret that made them kill." Even if Klebold and Harris were gay, this one factor in their lives would hardly have been sufficient to transform them into the homicidal maniacs they became.

However, when you consider the harassment and persecution

they faced daily from their peers at Columbine High School, their desperation becomes a bit more understandable. Even after their deaths, students openly — and at

Op-Ed

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times proudly — dismissed Klebold and Harris as "freaks" and "faggots." One woman even described them as "pretty much disposable people."

Such persecution may well

have pushed Klebold and Harris over the edge. It's the same vicious teasing and taunting that brings many gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and sometimes even straight teenagers to consider suicide. How they perceive themselves is quite often beside the point; it's how they are perceived by their classmates that

much finger-pointing on our part — the queer version of the blame-and-scapegoat game. It also tends to isolate homophobia as something "other," as something clearly and identifiably outside of ourselves.

The very notion of internalized homophobia tells us that this is not so. Most of us carry inside

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No Joy in Jenny Jones Verdict

BY LAURA MILLER

On May 7, 1999, the jurors in the infamous Jenny Jones case awarded 25 million dollars to the family of Scott Amedure, the gay man who was shot by his "secret crush," Jonathan Schmitz, after revealing his feelings for Schmitz on *The Jenny Jones Show*. (The "secret crush" episode was never aired.)

After only seven hours of deliberation, the jury found the show to have been negligent in inviting Schmitz onto the show to meet his secret admirer without telling him that the admirer was a man. Schmitz, who had a well-documented history of emotional problems, shot and killed Amedure three days after the taping of the episode, and was later convicted of second-degree murder. As the Amedures' attorney explained the case to the jury, the show "solicited a victim. They picked a murderer and provided a motive. They did everything in this case except pull the trigger."

So a gay man's family walks away with \$25 million as a result of anti-gay violence — a great victory for the GLBT community. Or is it?

One obvious criticism of the verdict has already been made: it may have a "chilling effect" on the First Amendment. In other words, shows like *The Jenny*

Show may be less likely to put on shows on "controversial" topics such as same-sex crushes if they are afraid of being sued when violence results. On one hand, the "secret crush" episode may have been trying to exploit gay people, to treat them as freaks for the purpose of entertainment. But on the other hand, Jenny Jones may have intended the episode as a way of being more inclusive, as a way of educating the public not to assume that all crushes are heterosexual. I fear that this verdict may ultimately discourage talk-show hosts who are actually gay-friendly and are acting with the best of intentions.

More importantly, as a symbol I fear that the verdict does more harm than good. Schmitz was convicted of second-degree murder rather than first-degree murder and Amedure's family was awarded this verdict because the juries in both cases believed that *The Jenny Jones Show* shared responsibility for the murder. To be sure, part of the reason the juries made such findings was that Schmitz was so obviously mentally disturbed that the show should have known better than to embarrass him in this manner.

However, both of the juries also seem to have been operating on the assumption that, for a heterosexual man, it is so humiliat-

ing to be found sexually attractive by another man, that it is foreseeable or even justified for the heterosexual man to react with violence.

It was not long ago that a man who murdered his wife or her lover upon finding them in bed together could basically be excused on the theory that, because his wife was his property, the act of adultery was so provocative and intrusive that he could not be held fully responsible for his actions.

It was also not so long ago that rape victims who pressed charges would be interrogated about their own sexual behavior, their flirtatiousness, or their manner of dress as if something they did "provoked" the rapist.

The underlying message of the Jenny Jones verdict is exactly the same as the one transmitted by these old criminal cases — that a heterosexual man cannot be expected to control himself when his sexuality is threatened or aroused. I think we can expect better of heterosexual men, and I look forward to the day when violence, sexism, and homophobia are no longer dismissed as "understandable."

So I'm not jumping for joy over this verdict, and I don't think any of us should be. As much as I detest daytime talk shows, I'm with Jenny on this one. ▼

matters. That simple bit of teenage reality forms the basis of peer pressure, and it's the root of all evil as soon as you set foot on high school (and most college) campuses.

Even so, diehard homophobes assert that gayness in and of itself leads young people to contemplate suicide. This seems in keeping with their notion of homosexuality as something akin to brainwashing — it's a cultish thing to do, and we've all seen the results of cultish behavior in the mass suicides of groups like Heaven's Gate.

For these reasons, urgent calls to "save our gay youth from suicide" often fall on deaf ears in the conservative community. "Save them from homosexuality first," they answer, "and then you'll save them from suicide." In cases like the Columbine killing, the conservative right wing is just as likely to link homosexuality to violent behavior, despite prevalent stereotypes of gay men as weak, cowardly, effeminate, and squeamish in the face of violence. In such equations, the harassment and persecution often gets left out of the mix.

This isn't surprising, since some of the harassment and persecution originates with the religious right, and they prefer to maintain an appearance of dignified respectability and tolerance. Their "love the sinner but hate the sin" line becomes some sort of magic mantra capable of maintaining their innocence despite well-documented violent effects of their own hate-mongering.

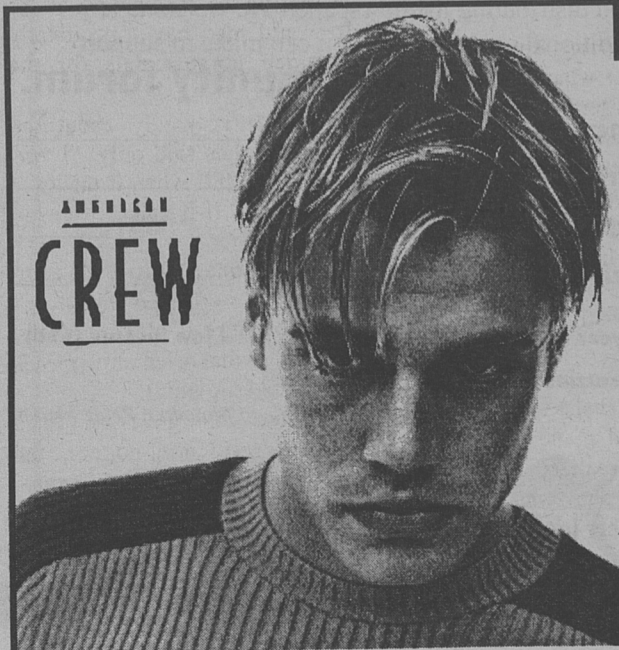
It would be wonderful if we could stop there and say we've found the source of the problem, but we can't and we shouldn't. To do so would amount to just so

us at least the vestiges of homophobia. Gay youth understand this internalized homophobia quite well. It's what makes them so prone to suicidal and risky behavior. It also contributes toward making them vulnerable to the kinds of cultish tendencies we see in groups like Klebold's and Harris's Trenchcoat Mafia.

In my own activism, I've come in contact with a number of gay and lesbian young adults. Quite often, they sport multiple piercings, dye their hair, and wear what could be called non-traditional clothing. Rather than conform to the "in" crowd at their schools, they defiantly consort with the "out" crowd. Even though this crowd defines itself in contrast to the "in" crowd, it exerts similar pressures in terms of dress and behavior. The social mechanisms are the same; they've simply been directed away from the norm.

When gay youth are excluded from societally acceptable cults such as high school sports teams,

OP-ED, P6



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