



# Rosie's Causes: **The Big Issue**



**SEAN GRAVES**

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Sean often talks with schoolkids about the consequences of bullying.

### **The Dangers of School Bullying**

In the aftermath of Columbine, four high school Girl Scouts organize a campaign to deal with widespread student teasing—and the deadly rage that can result. A Web exclusive.

### **In Rosie's Community**

Talk on our "Big Issue" board about what you think parents and schools can do to prevent violence.

## Sean Graves's New World

Three years ago he was wounded and paralyzed at Columbine High School. Today Sean is graduating and looking forward to a life he almost lost.

By Laura Pulfer

Sean Graves was lying outside Columbine High School, just beyond a cafeteria exit. He'd been shot four times. One bullet had grazed his neck. Blood gushed, but no permanent damage would be done there. Two more bullets had torn through his abdomen. These injuries would be trouble, causing raging infection and terrible pain. But one more bullet—the one that would change everything—had passed through his hip and shattered his spine. He could not feel his legs, could not run to safety even if he could figure out where safety was.

Moments later, Sean heard someone walking very deliberately down concrete steps, toward him. The 15-year-old boy decided to play dead, smearing blood from his neck onto his face so he'd look mortally wounded. Then, he remembers, "I held my breath." Next to him, Daniel Rohrbough and Lance Kirklín were shot again at close range. Now the gunman stood over Sean, who remained motionless, still holding his breath. "I could hear his boot heel pivot on the broken glass, right by my head," he says. It is a moment he has relived many times.

The horror began at 11:19 a.m. on April 20, 1999, at the school in Littleton, Colorado, a suburb 45 minutes south of Denver. Within 16 minutes, the shooters killed 13 people and wounded 21 others. Daniel Rohrbough was dead, and Lance Kirklín was alive. And when paramedics picked up Sean, "by my belt and my shirt," a few minutes after noon and put him in an ambulance, he was still conscious. They took him to Swedish Medical Center in Englewood, a suburb just north of Littleton.

As Sean's parents, Randy and Natalie, who both work at the Lockheed Martin plant in Littleton, drove to the hospital (Randy got a call on his cell phone telling him where to find Sean), the sky was dotted with black helicopters and the roads were crowded with car caravans of other parents and emergency vehicles. At the hospital a doctor told them bluntly that their son was seriously injured, that he was paralyzed and might never walk again because of the damage to his spinal cord.

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After two surgeries to repair damage to his bowel, hip and spine, Sean was moved around the corner to Craig Hospital, a world-renowned facility exclusively dedicated to rehabilitation and research for patients with spinal-cord and brain injuries. There, in May, three weeks after the shooting, Sean moved the big toe on his left foot. It was a good sign, an indication that some of the damaged nerves were mending. But Sean was still a long way from walking.

Healing is not just physical, of course. Randy says part of his job as a father was "tough love." Once, Randy wheeled Sean to a park across from the rehab hospital. "I used to go there to smoke cigars, get away for a few minutes," Randy says. He had been in the park often enough to know what his son would see at dusk across the way, through one of the hospital windows: an attendant feeding a man in a wheelchair, a quadriplegic. "And you realize," Sean says, "that some people have it worse than you do."

Sean left the hospital in July of 1999, with only 135 pounds on his 6-foot-plus frame. He was wracked by infections, the result of his perforated bowel. "I was weak," he says. "I was afraid to try new things." His family nudged him relentlessly to use the exercise machines that had been set up in his house and to keep working on his recovery. "We didn't cut him any slack," Randy says. A year after he left the hospital, Sean mastered driving with hand controls, and his parents had a secondhand midnight-blue Ford pickup truck specially fitted for him. (He also has a special four-wheel dirt bike.) On the rear window of the truck is a decal, "Bad Ass Boys Drive Bad Ass Toys," a gift from his mother, who says sweetly, "He took four bullets. He deserved it."

One day about two years after he left Craig Hospital, Sean told his mother he wanted to show her something. The "something" was a "walk" around the family room, using just one crutch.

"I bawled like a baby behind his back," Natalie says. He'd practiced in secret for several weeks, hoisting himself out of his chair, pushing himself.

In February of last year, Sean had tendon surgery to improve his ability to use his right leg. He has increased his time using just the crutch. He can walk about 50 yards with it. When he goes out, he takes both the chair and the crutch. "The more I can do—I figure eventually I won't need the chair," he explains. He says he's glad he decided to return to Columbine. Brother Seth, who just turned 16, is a sophomore there, and Sean will graduate this month. "I left it up to them," their mother says. "I'm proud they are not running from what happened."

About the shooters, Natalie says only, "I believe those boys fell through the cracks." Sean didn't know them; he referred to them in his statements to the investigators as "the short guy" and "the tall one." He has learned more about them now, of course, as we all have. "I was a chubby kid," Sean says. "I was teased. But I could go home and talk

to somebody. It took me getting shot to realize they might not have had the same ability, you know, to reach out and talk to somebody." He hitches straighter in his chair—his back hurts at times—and then he says thoughtfully, "I try to think of what happened as a learning experience. It taught people to take bullying seriously. It taught us that when people say they are going to do something horrible, sometimes they will."

In a settlement with the parents of the shooters and those who supplied the guns, about \$2.85 million has been distributed to 36 families of Columbine shooting victims. The exact amount each family received is confidential. With every anniversary, Sean, who's now 18, patiently answers questions. But he does not like to talk about that day, "because it's hard to get along with your life."

Gritty and stubborn, Sean believes that his life has been damaged but not ruined. Three years ago, he was a 15-year-old boy whose whole future stretched out before him. After surgery, after painstakingly relearning the things of his childhood, after "tough love" from an anguished family and after confronting the bitter lessons of April 20, 1999, the miracle is that Sean Graves has discovered that one thing remains the same.

His whole life is still ahead.



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To learn more about Sean Graves's recovery, pick up the May issue of ROSIE.  
Photographed by Ken Redding.

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