

‘It had a big impact on my life’

State Rep. Patrick Neville, a student at Columbine in 1999, fights for gun-owners’ rights



State Rep. Patrick Neville has said surviving the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 changed his life trajectory and inspired him to live in a way that honors the victims.

JESSICA GIBBS

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**Jessica Gibbs
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Patrick Neville was a 15-year-old sophomore at Columbine High School when two armed students walked into the building and killed 13 people, then themselves. He was on school grounds but outside when the shooting began, he said.

He doesn't go into detail about what he saw and heard in those moments. There are survivors with more compelling stories than his, he said, and the events of that day have been widely reported. Besides, recounting the story time and time again is "exhausting," he said, particularly leading up to the massacre's 20th anniversary.

But make no mistake: "It had a big impact on my life," Neville said.

Today, Neville, 35, is a Republican state representative and the House minority leader. The Castle Rock resident is among Colorado's leading voices on gun-owners' rights and stood in opposition to the recently passed "red flag" bill that allows firearms to be temporarily taken away from people deemed a significant threat to themselves or others.

April 20, 1999 was a blur, but it wholly changed his life trajectory, Neville said on a late-March day at his office in the state Capitol. Later in his collegiate career, at the University of Colorado Denver, it would influence his perspective on gun rights.

His most vivid memory of the day of the tragedy is of students gathering at an elementary school following the shooting. First, there was a crowd, but as buses came to evacuate them, it slowly dwindled.

Then, the father of a student asked if Neville had seen his son. Neville had not.

He'd known the father who approached him, and his son, since the third grade. The boys played baseball together and served as captains of their team as their fathers coached.

By high school, Neville was making all the wrong choices — in his words, he was a “punk.” Meanwhile, the man's son “was making all the right decisions in life.” The two had drifted apart as a result.

“Once the names came out, he never got to see his son again,” Neville said, declining to name the father in what he called a politically-charged climate.

But that's where the survivor's guilt caught up with him, Neville said. Students who were excelling died that day. It inspired the teenager to change his life course.

He would go on to serve in the U.S. Army and deploy to Iraq, which impacted his life similarly to how Columbine did. He watched families mourn lost loved ones and he buried his friends. It called to mind going to the funerals of his peers after Columbine.

Then in 2014, he became the state representative for House District 45, encompassing Castle Rock, Castle Pines and portions of unincorporated Douglas County. He's now in his third term.

Neville said he didn't have strong opinions on gun rights until college, when he received his conceal-carry permit.

“At the time, it was illegal for me to conceal carry in my college classroom,” he said, “and if there was one place that I really felt uncomfortable or vulnerable it was sitting in a classroom.”

Colorado now allows permit holders to carry firearms on higher-education campuses.

This legislative session, Neville introduced a bill to allow someone with a concealed-carry permit to carry a firearm on public elementary, middle, junior high and high school grounds.

He believes gun-free zones enable mass shooters. Allowing certain people to carry — with extensive training, he said — could deter potential attackers.

The bill, which was voted down, was influenced by his experience at the high school and was also what reconnected him with Columbine victims. Some in favor of the bill reached out, he said. He plans to pursue legislation opposing gun-free zones again.

In the meantime, he's met more Columbine victims and learned more of their stories. As the public observes the 20th anniversary, it's the lives and memories of their lost loved ones he wants people to remember.

“It’s amazing when I look back, it doesn’t seem like it was 20 years ago,” he said. “You look at the photos, and we were just little kids with such potential.”