

## She Said Yes

### The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernal

By Misty Bernal

(Farmington, PA; Plough Publishing House, 1999)

From the Publisher .....	1
Tuesday .....	1
Daddy's Girl .....	2
Murder, She Wrote .....	2
Home Front.....	4
U-turn.....	7
The Trials of Love.....	8
Dying We Live .....	10
Reflections.....	10

#### FROM THE PUBLISHER

Though the precise chronology of the murderous rampage that took place at Columbine High on April 20, 1999—including the exact details of Cassie's death—may never be known, the author's description as printed in this book is based on the reports of numerous survivors of the library (the main scene of the massacre) and takes into account their varying recollections.

#### TUESDAY

April 20, 1999, started like any other school day in our house. At 5:45 Brad, my husband, left for work, and a little later I got up to wake the kids. Getting teenagers out of bed is always a battle, but that Tuesday was especially difficult. Cassie had stayed up late the night before catching up on homework, and her books were all over the kitchen table. Her cat's litter box needed attention, too, and we were running late with breakfast. I remember trying not to lecture her about all the things that needed doing before she left for school...

About 7:20 Chris (15) left. Shortly afterwards, Cassie grabbed her backpack and headed for the door. As she left I leaned over the banister to say goodbye, like I always do: "Bye, Cass. I love you." "Love you too, Mom," she mumbled back. Then she was gone, through the back yard, over the fence, and across the soccer field to the high school, which is only a hundred yards away. I dressed, locked up, and drove off to work.

Around lunchtime I got a call from Charlie, a friend, asking me if I'd heard about some shooting at the high school. I tried not to panic. I decided to call Brad, just in case he had heard anything.

Brad was at the house when I called; he had left work early and gone home sick. He had heard several pops outside, and one or two louder booms, but he wasn't too concerned. It was lunchtime, and there were always kids running around outdoors. Probably just some prankster setting off firecrackers.

After I hung up, Brad went out to the back yard and

looked over the fence. There were cops everywhere. Back in the house, he turned on the TV and caught what must have been the first news bulletins. All at once he realized this was no prank.

The next 36 hours were pure hell. By the time I got to Columbine, hundreds of desperate parents and relatives, police officers, bomb squads, reporters and onlookers had already descended on the area around the school, and complete pandemonium reigned.

We were sent to a public library to await word on our children. Soon lists of the injured and safe were being printed out and distributed. In between scanning the latest updates, I ran breathlessly from one cluster of students to another yelling for Cassie and Chris and asking if anyone had seen them. Searching the school grounds itself was out of the question. The whole campus was cordoned off and surrounded by an eerie ring of rifle-carrying SWAT teams.

Chris showed up early in the afternoon; he had fled to a neighbor's home near the high school and finally got through to Brad, who was stationed by the phone at home. Brad reached me on my cell phone. Immediately I breathed easier: Thank God, now we only have to look for one child. But *where* was my daughter?

Though hundreds of fleeing students had been loaded into buses and driven off to safety in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, others, like Chris, had escaped the mayhem on foot, and in some cases it was hours before their whereabouts were confirmed. The injured, many of them unidentified, had been rushed off in ambulances, and dozens of others hid for hours in closets and classrooms throughout the building. Some, we found out later, were lying alone bleeding to death.

Weeks later, we heard the police were certain that all the missing were dead as early as 8:00 that evening; that they had accounted for everyone else. But because they didn't have positive confirmation, they hadn't said this, and so I continued to grasp at straws.

Gradually fatigue overtook me that evening, and I tried to go to sleep. It was impossible. Around 3:30 in the morning I finally got up and dressed, and Brad walked with me down to the corner, where the first sheriff's car was sitting. Thinking the driver might have something new to tell us, we asked him several pointed questions, but he only hemmed and hawed. Finally Brad said, "Look, just tell us the truth. We have reason to believe that our daughter is still in the school. Is anyone in there alive?" The driver answered, "Okay, I'll give it to you straight. There is no one left alive."

Around 22 hours later, on Thursday morning, a woman from the coroner's office called to tell us what we had been dreading, through expecting, to hear. They had Cassie's body. Now there was nothing to do but admit that our daughter was gone forever, that she would *never* come home to me again. I wept as I had never wept before.

\* \* \*

From what I have since been told, it must have been about 11:15 that morning when Cassie walked

into the high school library, backpack on her shoulder, to do her homework installment--another installment of *Macbeth* for English class. Crystal, a close friend, was in the library too:

Sara, Seth and I had just gone over to the library to study, like any other day. We had been there maybe five minutes when a teacher came running in, yelling that there were kids with guns in the hall. At first we were like, "It's a joke, a senior prank." Seth said, "Relax, it's just paint balls." Then we heard shots, first down the hall, then coming closer and closer. Mrs. Nielsen was yelling at us to get under the tables, but no one listened. Then a kid came in and dropped to the floor. There was blood all over his shoulder. We got under our table, fast. Mrs. Nielsen was at the phone by now, calling 911. Seth was holding me in his arms, with his hand on my head, because I was shaking so badly, and Sara was huddled under there with us too, holding on to my legs. Then Eric and Dylan came into the library, shooting and saying things like, "We've been waiting to do this our whole lives," and cheering after each shot.

I had no idea who they were--I only found out their names afterward--but their voices sounded scary, evil. At the same time they seemed so happy, like they were playing a game and getting a good kick out of it. Then they came up to our table and knocked a chair over. It hit my arm, and then it hit Sara on the head. They were right above us. I could hardly breathe, I was so scared. Then they suddenly left the room, probably to reload. It seemed like they had run out of ammunition. That's when we ran for it. We dashed out a side door of the library, an emergency exit, and made it just before they came back in.

Crystal lost track of Cassie once the shooters entered the room, and there are conflicting versions of what she was doing. One student remembers seeing her under a table, hands clasped in prayer; another says she remained seated. Josh, a sophomore who spoke with me a few weeks after the incident, did not see her at all, but he says he will never forget what he heard as he crouched under a desk about 25 feet away:

I couldn't see anything when those guys came up to Cassie, but I could recognize her voice. I could hear everything like it was right next to me. One of them asked her if she believed in God. She paused, like she didn't know what she was going to answer, and then she said yes. She must have been scared, but her voice didn't sound shaky. It was strong. Then they asked her why, though they didn't give her a chance to respond. They just blew her away.

One of the first officials on the scene the next day was Gary, a member of our church and an investigator

from the Jefferson County sheriff's department:

When they got to the school, they divided us up into seven teams of investigators. All of the victims who had been killed had been left in place overnight, because the investigators wanted to make sure that everything was documented before they collected the evidence.

As soon as I entered the library I saw Cassie. I knew it was her immediately. She was lying under a table close to another girl. Cassie had been shot in the head at very close range. In fact, the bullet wound indicated that the muzzle was touching her skin. That blast took her instantly.

Perhaps the cruelest irony of losing Cassie the way we did is the fact that she never would have been at Columbine that day in the first place had we not tried to rescue her by pulling her out of another high school, the one where she had begun the ninth grade, just two and a half years before. Of course, at that time our relationship was frayed almost beyond repair, and it felt like a minor victory every time we got her home from school in one piece, let alone into the kitchen for a mundane event like a family meal. But that's another chapter.

### **DADDY'S GIRL**

Cassie was born on November 6, 1981, no more than five or six miles from the spot where we laid her to rest 17 years later. Our first child, she awoke in me that elemental love that will turn even the most indifferent woman into a radiant mother. She turned Brad's life upside down too. She was Daddy's little girl.

Looking back on Cassie's childhood, there was nothing especially unusual about it. Every mother has a warm, fuzzy feeling about when her babies were little. Now that she's gone, though, I've begun to realize the significance of every minute you spend with your child. I know it's a cliché, but it's still got some truth to it. When the kitchen's a mess, the telephone's ringing, and the kids are getting in the way, it's easy to snap or get impatient or upset. Those moments are unavoidable, but you've got to make time in between, just for your kids. Before you know it, that cute little four-year-old is a sullen teenager who won't even acknowledge your presence in the room. And in Cassie's case, at least, I don't know where we would have turned, once she was a teen, if we hadn't had a store of happy memories to fall back on. It was a place to start when we needed to rediscover our love.

### **MURDER, SHE WROTE**

Three years ago in December, about two weeks before Christmas, I quit my job. I was working in the legal department of Lockheed Martin, where I had a full-time position, but the contract I was on was ending and it seemed a good time to break off. More important, I wanted to spend fewer hours at my desk and more hours with my kids. Chris's grades were

slipping at school, and Cassie seemed to be growing more distant every day.

On one of the first days I spent at home after quitting my job, I was sitting there feeling blue about my inability to connect with Cassie, when I remembered that my brother and his wife had once given her a "teen" Bible--a New Testament with a sort of study guide giving young readers insights into dealing with their parents. Hoping to gain some tips myself, I wandered into Cassie's room and began looking through her drawers for it.

I found the Bible, all right, but before that I came across a stack of letters that froze me in my tracks and threw our home life into an ugly drama that was to last for the next three months. Sinking into the nearest chair, I began to read.

A letter addressed to Cassie from her best friend Mona (not her real name) opened with several lines of unprintable sex talk and ninth-grade gossip, and went on to discuss a teacher at the high school, Mrs. R., and invited Cassie, "Want to help me murder her? She called my parents and told them about my F." The letter ended with a reminder about a "neat spell," drawings of knives and vampire teeth, and a caricature of Mrs. R. lying in a pool of blood, butcher knives protruding from her chest.

In one letter the writer went to great lengths to describe how much she hated her father; in another, how much she adored Marilyn Manson. There was endless talk about the sexiness of black clothes and makeup, the "fun" of contraband alcohol, marijuana, and self-mutilation, and the adventures of a classmate whose girlfriend went to "this satanic church."

Several of the letters advised Cassie to do away with us and thus solve her innumerable problems. One ended, "Kill your parents! Murder is the answer to all of your problems. Make those scumbags pay for their suffering."

Another was illustrated with grisly drawings of a couple ("Ma and Pa") strung up by their intestines, daggers hanging from their hearts. This letter was signed with a vampire-toothed monkey with a pentagram around its neck--Mona's symbol for herself. Still another depicted a crudely drawn knife dripping with "parent's guts," headstones for "Pa and Ma Bernall," and the letters R.I.P.

On a piece of notebook paper scrawled with drawings of marijuana leaves, vampires, moons and stars, Mona wrote, "My guts are hungry for that weird stuff. ... I f--ing need to kill myself, we need to murder your parents. Kill me with your parents, then kill yourself so you don't go to jail."

I was flabbergasted, so dazed that I could hardly pick up the phone. But I did, and when I got through to Brad I told him I needed him to come home right away. Once he arrived at the house, we sat in stunned silence reading one letter after the next until we reached the bottom of the pile.

Most of the letters were written by Cassie's best friend, but as we later found out, she too had written similar ones.

\* \* \*

Experts say that the essence of good parenting is good guidance, and that's surely true. But sometimes--despite the best efforts of parents and relatives, teachers and friends--a good kid will go bad ways, and there is little more you can do than admit your shortcomings and start picking up the pieces. In Cassie's case, Brad and I had to recognize that there was a whole side of her life we knew very little about.

Naturally there had been signs. Though Cassie was in the ninth grade at the time we found the letters, she had been sliding away from us ever since the fifth or sixth grade, when she first began latching onto Mona and ignoring her other friends.

In eighth grade, when Cassie began to toss our values and rules overboard in favor of Mona's opinions, we tried to minimize the contact between the two and encouraged Cassie to hang out with other girls. It was useless; she always insisted that there just wasn't anyone else she was close to. And so we backed off.

All the same, I had a nagging feeling that something was not right. Still, there was nothing I could put my finger on.

Cassie was as good as any teen at playing straight. She stayed at school after hours, because "I've got to pull up my art grade" (never mind the pot smoking and drinking, and that, contrary to what we had been led to believe, there was no supervision in the room). She showed us her cool new CD's, though not the ones she knew we wouldn't approve of. She introduced us to Rick, a classmate who seemed harmless enough, but she did her best to keep us ignorant of his dabbling in satanic rituals and his problems at home. (I later became so concerned about Rick that I went to the assistant principal about him. He acknowledged that the boy was "out of control," but said that nothing could be done: not even his parents could handle him.)

In retrospect, Cassie's change from a trusting child to a sulking stranger was so gradual that it blindsided us. It was only when we started getting calls from her high school about her ditching classes, when unexpected D's and F's showed up on her report card, and when we caught her in one too many little lies that we began to take things more seriously. We were losing our daughter.

One day after Brad picked up Cassie from school he came home uneasy about the occult symbols that seemed to decorate everything her friends were making in art class. Several days later, when I picked her up from another after-school art session, I grew increasingly disturbed myself. Cassie was working on her project, all right, but sitting there at the same table with her in his black garb, black eyeliner and chain jewelry was Rick, with Mona snuggling against his chest.

Maybe it's just a mom thing, but there are times when your gut tells you there is something wrong with a situation, and you are certain it's not just because you are "out of touch" with the next generation. This was definitely one of those times. There was an oppressive atmosphere in the room, and I wanted my

daughter out.

I don't know exactly when it was, but at some point Brad began examining some of Cassie's music and realized that it wasn't just entertainment. An excerpt from a song by Marilyn Manson, the rock group of choice among Cassie's friends at the time, and a favorite of the two boys at Columbine who killed her, is a case in point:

*I throw a little fit  
I slit my teenage wrist...  
But your selective judgments  
And good-guy badges  
Don't mean a f--- to me  
Get your gun, get your gun...*

I shudder to think where we might be today had I not come across those letters. That was the real wake-up call.

Brad and I sat on our bed in a state of shock, reeling from the impact of our discovery. We were holding the reason for our worst fears right in our own hands, and we had to do something. The question was what.

In the end, it seemed clear to both of us that this was not a problem we could deal with alone, and we contacted Mona's mother, the sheriff's department, and George, our pastor. We also copied a set of the letters for Mona's parents and a set for ourselves. (The originals had to be filed with the sheriff.) Then we sat and waited for Cassie.

When Cassie breezed in from school, we stopped her and told her we had found the letters. At first she tried to play it down. Then, once she realized we were not about to let her off the hook, she flew into a screaming rage. One, we were overreacting, because she had never been serious about killing us or anyone else, and would never dream of doing such a thing. Two, we had trampled on her rights by going through her bedroom without her permission and taking things that did not belong to us. Three, since it was obvious that we had no love at all for her, our only daughter, she would relieve us of the burden by running away and killing herself. She was livid.

How we managed to muddle through the next weeks I'll never know. When Cassie wasn't raging, she was seething and moody, and she continually taunted us with threats of running away. I began to dread getting up in the morning.

December 20, the day we had discovered the letters, had been the last day of school before the holidays, and one of the first things we had decided was that we were not going to let Cassie go back to her present high school. From now on she would go to a private Christian school. On top of this we began regular searches of her room and backpack, monitored her use of the phone, and forbade her to leave the house without our permission. Finally, we told her that she could no longer have any contact whatsoever with Mona or anyone else from their old crowd.

Cassie, of course, was beside herself with anger.

So was Mona, who wrote her a note saying that we must be some of the dumbest parents in the world if we thought that pulling Cassie out of public school was going to make things any better. She was sure it would only "make things a million times worse." The letter ended, "God, all I can say is if I had your parents they would be gone a long time ago. But enough about their revolting stupidity. Let's decide now how we should kill them..."

There was only one thing we allowed Cassie to participate in, and that was youth group activities at West Bowles Community Church. It was not church in itself that was important to us. All we knew was this: threadbare as our relationship was, we loved Cassie dearly and wanted her to find a new lease on life in a place where she would not be tempted to return to her old self-destructive ways. All we wanted was for Cassie to be truly happy, and she hadn't been up till then, not even on her own terms.

Dave (our youth pastor) still remembers the night we went over to his office to see if there was any way he could help us. After hearing about the letters we had found, he walked away from our meeting thinking "We'll give it our best, but this girl's going to be a hard one. She's gone, unreachable."

Initially, it seemed Dave would be right. In a letter to a friend dated January 4, 1997, Cassie wrote:

...The letters they found in my room were really graphic, and even had pictures of how we would kill my parents. So now they know about the smoking, drinking, all that stuff, plus about our not-serious killing stuff. So now I can't speak to my best friends, Mona and Judy, and my other friend, Rick. If I see or speak to Mona, the sheriff will file a restraining order. Yeah, my parents contacted the police! I think they've completely blown this whole thing out of proportion. I'm not addicted to alcohol or cigarettes. I'm not a pot-head, but basically I'm really lonely and depressed and hate my parents. Hope your life doesn't suck as bad as mine. I tried running away, but they caught me. One good thing, though, I'm going to sneak out to the Marilyn Manson concert. Mona and Rick are going too, so at least I'll get to see them then.

## **HOME FRONT**

To many people, the content of Mona and Cassie's letters might seem like typical teen gossip, and in a certain way it is. Gruesome illustrations aside, it is a fact of life that fifteen-year-old girls do say things like, "I'll kill my mother if she doesn't let us go to the mall." But where do you draw the line between idle threats and real ones?

Three weeks after Cassie's death a friend of mine talked to a student at Columbine whose brother knew Cassie's murderers. Apparently one of them, Eric, had boasted of buying the propane tanks he later used in his efforts to blow up the cafeteria, but no one had taken him seriously.

According to Annette, a friend of Cassie's who also attends Columbine, casual conversations about violence and death are so common at school that few people think twice when overhearing them. When a girl in her Spanish class talked about going to a morgue one weekend, to look at dead bodies and learn how people die, she thought it was "pretty weird," but when the girl said it was for a book she was writing, Annette relaxed. Just another person looking for attention, she thought.

A few days later the same girl came to class talking about the knives and axes she had at home, and said she wanted to bring them to school so she could show friends how she does "these cool things with fake blood." "You just don't know what to take seriously anymore," Annette says. "You think they're just saying these things to get attention, and most of them probably are. But then something happens--like with Eric and Dylan."

During the first months after we pulled Cassie out of her old high school, it crossed my mind more than once that maybe we had been too severe with her. Since then, however, I have grown increasingly confident that we were not overly harsh.

In the late summer of 1997 in Lakewood, a nearby suburb, friends refused to believe a fourteen-year-old who said he was going to kill his parents and run off to California with his girlfriend. The next day, aided by a close friend, he attacked his father with a butcher knife and almost killed him. After the stabbing, satanic carvings were discovered in the boy's bedroom.

In September of the same year, Brad and I read of a similar incident in a local newspaper: a high school senior had shot and killed his stepfather, apparently after an argument in front of the TV set, and then gone into the garage and turned the gun on himself. Several months later there was a second child-parent murder in our area: this time the victim was a Highlands Ranch woman allegedly killed by her seventeen-year-old son and stuffed in the trunk of the family car.

In a time when supposedly peaceful middle-class suburbs like ours are breeding children capable of such things, you begin to realize that talk is never just talk. In Cassie's case, for example, it was the result of an enormous gulf of miscommunication and hostility between us--a gulf that only time, love and attention would bridge.

Now, almost three years after the fact--and in light of the shootings at Columbine--it has been a revelation for me to hear Dave's thoughts on the matter:

Taking a kid out of school and finding him a new one, grounding him or doing whatever else you need to do to pull him up short--that might look like shutting him down. But in fact it's giving him the possibility of a whole new life. I've told that to so many parents. Many just disconnect. They say, "Well, she's already had sex five or six times," or "I know he's in with a bad crowd, but you can't stop a kid from seeing his only friends." They're worried, but they can't conceive of doing anything that will

demand a sacrifice, so they pretend it isn't really so bad.

In almost every case where I've seen parents take a strong stand, it's worked. It opens up a brand-new relationship. At first it's a war, because the kid's going to fight back, but deep inside his heart he's saying, "I like this. I like it that my mother's begun talking with me. I like it that my father's coming home early to see me."

Whenever I see a hurting kid, I wonder how often their father hugs them or pats them on the back, or how often their mother says, "I love you" or "Let me help you." Most of these kids have parents, but are their parents really there for them?

If anything vindicated us in the way we reacted to Cassie's behavior, it was her own recognition of how far she had gone. According to Jamie, a friend she first met at private school, Cassie herself said that her violent fantasies were more than talk. She had felt gripped by a very real power of darkness, and it had taken her months to break free.

In an autobiographical essay Cassie wrote for English class earlier this year, she admitted, "Throughout this time I hated my parents and God with the deepest, darkest hatred. There are no words that can accurately describe the blackness I felt..." Though Brad and I first saw this essay only after Cassie's death, neither of us was surprised. We had sensed all along that there was something truly evil at work in Cassie and her friends.

One thing I will never forget from the day we found the letters was pacing the house, praying. Brad was gone at the sheriff, and his mother had once said something about going through each and every room in the house and asking God for His protection. I remember coming to the doorway of Cassie's room and not being able to bring myself to walk in. I can't quite describe it, but it felt like you could almost cut the air in that room with a knife, the atmosphere was so oppressive.

Finally I went in, sat down on Cassie's bed and began to cry. I cried and cried, but I also prayed for God's protection over my daughter and all her troubled friends. If there was anything I felt certain of at that moment, it was that we were dealing with more than a bunch of rebellious teenagers. I felt that we were engaged in a spiritual battle.

\* \* \*

As days turned to weeks, and then to months, our struggle to win Cassie's cooperation developed into an all-out war. But we stuck to our guns. Brad repeatedly assured Cassie that we knew she wasn't stupid; she was simply not mature enough to make good decisions on her own. He told her:

Look, Cassie, you've got to believe that there are other ways to solve your problems. Before all this you were hanging out with a young lady who told you you'd have to kill us, and now you say you're going to kill yourself. That's not very smart...

You're not dumb, but you're not being rational. When you were little, you couldn't see the burners on top of the stove. We told you that if you put your hand up there, you were going to get burned, and you had to take our word for it. It's the same now. There are things you can't see and don't understand, and you'll just have to take my word for it. You've just got to trust us, Cassie. You've got to believe that we love you and we're not going to steer you wrong.

Brad would talk to Cassie in this way, trying to soothe her and calm her down, and sooner or later it always worked.

The other issue at stake, at least in Cassie's eyes, was her claim that we were holding her prisoner in her own home. Actually, we had told her from the start that we were willing to give her other options if she was going to refuse to live with us, and we offered her several alternatives. There was England, with Brad's sister, or Grand Lake, with my folks, or Texas, with Brad's dad and stepmother, and we had other relatives too. She could even run away, we told her, though she might find herself stuck in a foster home. The only thing we would not permit her to do was move in with a friend. But we warned her that once she made the choice of staying with us, it was going to be on our terms. As Brad summed it up to her, "No freedom, no rights, no privileges, no trust. You're going to have to start right back at square one and earn all those things back."

\* \* \*

We had hoped that enrolling Cassie in Christian Fellowship School would be the answer to at least some of her problems, and in the long run it proved to be a step in the right direction. But first it made things worse.

CFS is small and well-regulated, so we knew there was little chance Cassie would be able to escape the campus. Once we picked her up in the afternoons, however, the battles would resume. At first, because we wouldn't allow her to do anything--no after-school job, no phone calls, no visits to friends--we had to monitor every step she took. It wasn't easy, and the only way we could cope was by playing emotional "tag team." When one of us was at the end of our rope, the other would take over.

If we left the house to buy groceries or to run an errand, she would call one of her friends to arrange a rendezvous or try to sneak out of the house. We couldn't trust her alone for five minutes. What we ended up doing--and I know it sounds highly intrusive--was to remove every opportunity for deceit from Cassie's personal life. We went through her backpack on a daily basis; we searched her bedroom repeatedly to make sure there was nothing amiss (we found new notes); we even installed a voice-activated recording device on our own telephone. Drastic as they were, we felt that in order to save Cassie from the path she insisted on going down, we had to take these measures.

One of the first days after we had tapped the phone, we left the house for half an hour to pick up some things at the store, and while we were gone Cassie called her friends. When we got home we went to our bedroom, closed the door, and listened to the tape. Cassie was yelling and cursing and carrying on in the most profane language I had ever heard from her about how much she hated us. The young man on the other end of the line was talking about how miserable he was, too, and how he was planning to end his life by drinking gasoline.

In between Cassie's threats and fits, we continued to warn her that she was going nowhere--that her old life was over for good, that she was not going to see her old friends or call them, and that no matter how much she hated it, she was definitely going to continue attending private school. Sometimes I would sit with her as she screamed, my hand on her knee, praying aloud until she calmed down and telling her (like Brad did over and over as well) that I loved her.

There were times when I lost my temper, but then I would pull myself together and try again. I knew if we were ever going to truly rebuild our relationship with Cassie, we ourselves had some work to do. The issue was not cornering her, or winning the battle for winning's sake, but finding her heart, and letting her find ours. Like it or not, we had lost Cassie's trust and respect just as she had lost ours, and the route to regaining it would have to be a two-way street.

In more concrete terms, we could not only demand sacrifices of Cassie, but had to make sacrifices ourselves. For starters, I decided not to go back to work, at least for the time being. I didn't do it lightly, because I knew that staying at home was going to require a lot more of me than an eight-hour day in an office. But I knew that unless I rolled up my sleeves and got right in there with Cassie and became as fully involved in her life as I was when she was younger, we would only drift further apart.

Another way we tried to regain Cassie's trust was simply by working on our relationship--by holding our tongues when we were tempted to snap back at her, by trying to encourage her rather than nag, by offering her positive incentives and setting goals rather than putting her under pressure or making sarcastic remarks. We also made a deliberate effort to work on certain character-building basics: responsibility, respect, and self-respect.

Gradually we began to see where we had failed Cassie as parents, especially in the period leading up to her most troubled phase. Whenever Cassie was rebellious, we had tried harder to win her friendship. The more she acted out, the more we bent over backward for her. In the end, we were catering to her whims and wishes far more than we ever wanted to. It was Susan, a close friend of mine who had been a rebellious teenager herself, who helped us out of this trap. She'd say, "Stop trying so hard to be Cassie's friend. You're her mother; you call the shots. You don't have to have Cassie's approval for everything you do. She'll just end up thinking that the world revolves

around her and that she can do whatever she wants."

So I stopped trying to please Cassie and make her like me, and I started trying to guide her more consistently. Unbelievably, instead of rebelling, she accepted the boundaries I set for her and even seemed grateful for them.

\* \* \*

Once Cassie's resistance began to wear down, she grew used to the idea that she was never going to go back to her old school, and found out that not everyone at CFS hated her. She even made friends. Jamie, a fellow freshman, was one of the first students she latched onto, and I remember my excitement when Cassie told me about her. I envisioned this perfect little girl who would be just the right influence on my own wayward one. But I was in for a surprise when I met her.

Jamie had a short, bleached-blond haircut, and big chains and metal beads around her neck, and was wearing the sort of grungy attire that alternative types buy from places like Goodwill. Still, there was something striking about her warmth and her unselfconscious manner, and it was not hard to see why Cassie had found a friend in her.

Though Cassie grew less loyal to her old crowd over time, they were determined not to let go of her. In fact, they harassed her--and the rest of us--so often that we eventually had to move.

### **U-TURN**

One day in spring 1997, about three months after Cassie had transferred to CFS, she came home and told us that Jamie had invited her to a youth retreat. Actually, Jamie had written us a letter begging us to let her go, and Brad and I had talked about it, but we weren't really sure we knew Jamie well enough to say yes. Cassie finally seemed to be making some progress, yet we were still cautious and protective, and the idea of letting her go off for a whole weekend on her own seemed like an enormous risk at the time. We told her we'd have to think about it. In the end, however, we allowed her to go.

All weekend long I prayed for Cassie, and all weekend long I feared the worst. What is she would run away, and we would never see her again? I was very tense. In the end, everything turned out all right, although in terms of the effect it had on Cassie, we were totally unprepared. But I'll come back to that later. First I'll let Jamie tell the story from her point of view, which Brad and I heard only this summer, about six weeks after Cassie's death:

There was this youth group that I went to, which was a church group, but you could totally be yourself there. There were these Goth types, and a lot of kids who dressed like punk rockers, you know, alternative types with weird hair. I was pretty sure Cassie would feel comfortable there, because that's sort of where she was coming from. So when I heard about this retreat they were putting on, I

really wanted to go and have her come along too. She didn't want to come at first, but I told her more about it, how cool the people were, and then she wanted to. I didn't really promote the spiritual side of it at all.

When her mom and dad dropped us off at this parking lot where we were going to leave from for the weekend, I think they were a little scared, because many of the kids had dyed hair and stuff and they were trying to get Cassie away from stuff like that. But they let her come, and we had a really good time.

We were up at a park in the Rockies, about 300 kids, I'd say. There was a nighttime praise and worship service. I don't remember what the guy talked about, though the theme of the weekend was overcoming the temptations of evil and breaking out of the selfish life. It was the singing that for some reason just broke down Cassie's walls. It really seemed to change her. I wasn't expecting much out of the whole thing, also not for her, because she's always been so closed. I thought: just one weekend is not going to change her, though it could help. So when she totally broke down, I was pretty shocked.

We were outside the building and Cassie was crying. She was pouring out her heart--I think she was praying--and asking God for forgiveness. Inside a lot of kids had been bringing things up to the altar--drug paraphernalia and stuff like that; they were breaking off their old bonds.

Cassie didn't have anything to bring up to the altar, but she was pouring out all these things she felt bad about and wanting to give them all up. There was another guy there and he was praying for her too. I could hear some of what she was saying, but not all of it. I remember she was so scared that Chris would get into the same things she had. She said it was the worst hell she'd ever been through, and she wanted to keep her younger brother from putting himself through that.

After the service we stood under the stars in the mountains there, totally in awe of God. It was phenomenal: our smallness, and the bigness of the sky. The bigness of God was so real.

Later I noticed that Cassie's whole face had changed. You looked at her, and even though she was still shy, it was like her eyes were more hopeful. There was something new about her. Like from then on, when you went up to talk to her, you knew she wanted to talk. She also had good talks with different youth leaders.

At the end of that weekend, Brad and I went to pick up Cassie. I was still pretty nervous. Just as we got to the church, the bus got back, and I remember seeing all these kids with spiked hair hanging around and smoking cigarettes. I was thinking to myself: Why on earth did we ever allow her to go off on this trip? But when Cassie arrived, she got out of the car and came straight over to me. She hugged me, then looked me in

the eye and said, "Mom, I've changed. I've totally changed. I know you aren't going to believe it, but I'll prove it to you." Brad remembers:

When she left she had still been this gloomy, head-down, say-nothing girl. But that day--the day she came back--she was bouncy and excited about what had happened to her. It was as if she had been in a dark room and somebody had turned the light on, and she could suddenly see the beauty surrounding her.

I was highly skeptical. We were dealing with a child who had been incredibly hateful and desperate--experimenting with drugs, dabbling in the occult, and threatening to commit suicide or run away. I told Cassie later that I had thought her new attitude might just be a ploy--that her new friends had told her to come home and say, "I've changed" and hope we'd believe her and give her some of her freedoms back. Brad, on the other hand, was relieved by the whole thing and willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Cassie's conversion was a very real thing for her. She wasn't at all emotional. She was very down to earth, very matter of fact: "Mom, I've changed." And it really seemed to be true. From then on, Cassie became a totally different person. She never talked much about that weekend, and we never pressed her. But her eyes were bright, she smiled again like she hadn't in years, and she began to treat us (and her brother) with genuine respect and affection.

Cassie still wore her heavy bead necklaces and her old clothes, but somehow those things didn't matter much anymore. The important thing was the change in her spirit--her gentleness, her humility, and her happiness. She seemed to have found a freedom she had never had before, and it changed the entire atmosphere in our house.

### **THE TRIALS OF LOVE**

To someone who sees being born again as all there is to the Christian faith, it might be tempting to see Cassie's conversion as the sole point of her story. There is no question that the event was a life-changing one. She even regarded the date, March 8, 1997, as a sort of second birthday--the day she was "reborn." Still, I think she would agree that what came *after* that weekend was just as important as the experience itself.

For Cassie, March 8 not only meant the end of wallowing in anger and emptiness, confusion and despair, but the chance to begin a new chapter. Now life had a purpose beyond fighting back. Now there was hope.

Already before Cassie's about-face, she had begun attending the youth group at West Bowles Community Church, or WBCC, as the kids called it. Though the peers she met there were as normal as high school kids anywhere on the surface, their influence as a group had a remarkable effect on her. Before, the values we tried to instill in Cassie at home were

continually undermined by the friendships she made. Now they seemed to be reinforced.

Maybe it was the evenings they went out to eat together, or the ski trips, or the ultimate frisbee games on Saturday afternoons. Maybe it was the weekly Bible studies, the books they read, the landscaping and construction projects they did for Habitat for Humanity, or simply the discussions they had. Whatever it was, Cassie was slowly drawn in and won over.

At the end of summer 1997, between Cassie's freshman and sophomore years, Brad and I allowed her to transfer from CFS to Columbine High. Cassie had a good friend who had transferred there some time earlier, and it wasn't long before she began to badger us about how she disliked CFS and how badly she wanted to be at Columbine.

Earlier, of course, Brad and I wouldn't have given her request a second thought. By now, however, she had been doing well for several months, and we were open to the idea. So we went to the school and investigated. We talked to other parents and looked at the kids. Meanwhile both Cassie and her friend worked on us. Finally we gave in. But we warned her: if we felt the slightest bit uncomfortable about anything--if her grades began to slip, if she missed classes, if she began hanging out with the wrong crowd--she'd find herself back in private school in a flash.

At one point Cassie claimed, "Mom, I can't witness to the kids at Christian school. I could reach out to many more people if I were in a public one." [Little did she know how true that was to be.]

Another big difference between the old and new Cassie was the change in her tastes. Before she was obsessed with death rock and vampires and self-mutilation; now she was interested in photography and poetry and nature. Amanda, the friend who took her out to dinner the last Saturday of her life, remembers that she also loved Shakespeare:

She devoured it. She would spend ages in the library picking apart the language to make sure she understood it for English class. But she didn't like all of it. We were studying *Macbeth*--that's what she was reading in the library that Tuesday, because she was behind--and Cassie just didn't like it. She said it was too dark and sinister and death-oriented. Almost evil. But otherwise she loved that stuff.

We were spared further drama, and there was nothing noteworthy in the last two years. Cassie fretted about her weight and her looks, she worried about getting along with other kids at school and church, and she butted heads now and then with her younger brother, her father or me. According to Jamie, she still missed her old friends, too--at least for a while:

Even though she didn't want that kind of life, she still cared about her friends. It would kill her every time Mike and her other old friends drove by the house and hollered, which they did quite often, at



least till she started at Columbine. I don't know if they were intentionally tormenting her, but she felt like they were--they were kind of mocking the fact that she couldn't be there with them. They still had a hold on her for a long time, and she'd talk about that. She didn't want it but at the same time she did, because she wanted friends.

Later, though, she began to talk about them in a different context. Instead of saying stuff like, "Oh, we used to do this and that, and it was so much fun," she'd be like, "I wish they could find what I've found, and I want them to change too." She had a whole new attitude. It was obvious that she still cared about her old friends, but it was a different kind of caring.

Cassandra, a friend from West Bowles, was especially close to Cassie throughout the last year of her life:

Cassie and I sometimes talked about self-image, about how we saw ourselves. She really struggled with that at times. Sometimes she worried that she wasn't pretty enough, or she'd talk about needing to lose weight, or she'd wish she had a different personality. But even though she thought about those things, I know she never let them control her. She was always looking to God to help her out of this stuff and just be herself.

One thing that stands out, thinking about it now, is that Cassie never flirted. I think that's why a lot of girls could be friends with her. You see, when you have these popular girls at school who are flirtatious and smiley and super-outgoing, you can't really be friends, because you feel intimidated. You feel a little like you're in competition.

Cassie didn't want to be fake. No one was in competition with her, and that's totally amazing, at least for girls in our school and even our youth group.

When I think of Cassie I always think of what Saint Francis said about how you shouldn't seek to be loved as much as you should just love. That was like embedded in her. I think that Cassie felt that only God was going to be able to fulfill her, and that was probably the thing that kept her from going crazy about her image or from getting caught up looking for a boyfriend, or whatever. She refused to give in, and she was determined to overcome her problems by looking past them.

In a letter to Cassandra, dated Fall 1998, Cassie wrote:

Dear Cass,

...I know I need to give it all to Christ, but it's so hard. Just when I think I'm getting the hang of giving it all up, I find myself trying to take control of my life. It's spinning all around, and I can't grab ahold onto anything... If I could only let my pride fall, I might be able to finally find a sense of peace

and let down the barrier that is keeping me from growing in God.

I need to be completely honest with myself and to God and stop thinking I can fool Him--He's GOD, for crying out loud! And I can't make compromises. It's like being lukewarm--He'll spit me out if I keep it up. I can't ride the fence one day, trying to convince myself I'm just "reaching out to people" by acting "normal," and then trying to be a dedicated Christian the next. I don't want anyone to think of me as the WBCC Hypocrite...

Well, I could go on a lot longer, but I have homework and other things to do. Plus I don't want to overload your pretty little brain with Cassie Confessions.

Speaking from his informal observations of Cassie over the last two years of her life, Dave says that most of the time she was just like any other girl.

We were studying this one book, *Discipleship*, and she went straight to the chapter on marriage. She was normal, all right. Other times I saw her trying to move out of that pattern, looking for something else. To me, Cassie mirrored that verse, "Seek the Kingdom of God and His justice first, and then all the rest will be added to you." I think she really connected with that--putting God first, and not obsessing about her problems all day, like so many kids do.

Like the letters she left behind, the books Cassie studied with her youth group at their weekly reading session shed light on her search for life's meaning. Brad and I didn't realize how much these books affected her until after her death, because she never talked much about what she read, at least not at home. Looking at them now, however, with their Hi-Liter marks and underlinings and earnest handwritten notes, the impact they had on her is obvious.

In her copy of *Bread for the Journey*, a collection of meditations by Henri Nouwen, she marked the following from a piece entitled "Be Yourself."

Often we want to be somewhere other than where we are, or even to be someone other than who we are. We tend to compare ourselves constantly with others and wonder why we are not as rich, as intelligent, as simple, as generous, or as saintly as they are. Such comparisons make us feel guilty, ashamed, or jealous... We are unique human beings, each with a call to realize in life what nobody else can, and to realize it in the context of the here and now.

We will never find happiness by trying to figure out whether we are better or worse than others. We are good enough to do what we are called to do. Be yourself!

In another book, Cassie underlined only a solitary sentence in one chapter: "All of us should live life so as

to be able to face eternity at any time."

### **DYING WE LIVE**

Within a day of the shooting at Columbine high, the story of Cassie's exchange with the boys who killed her was making headlines across the nation, and by the next day people began calling her the "martyr of Littleton."

I'm profoundly proud of Cassie for refusing to cave in, and for saying yes to her killers, and I always will be. But I know Cassie would hate to be held up as a shining example or singled out for praise. Like Cassandra recently told me:

I just don't know how Cassie would respond to that label, "martyr." She wouldn't have said, "I'm so unworthy" and then taken it to herself anyway, like some people do. You know, "I'm really not worthy of this, but hey--lavish it on me all you want." Not Cassie.

We were talking once a few months ago and she said to me, "You know, I don't even feel God anymore. God seems so far away. I'm going to keep pushing on, but it's really hard right now." She wasn't one to fake it and say "I'm doing just fine." She was totally honest about what was bothering her, or what she was working through, which is so rare.

People can call Cassie a martyr, but they're off track if they think she was this righteous, holy person, and that all she did was read her Bible. Because she wasn't like that. She was just as real as anyone else. With all the publicity she's getting, I think she'd be flipping out. She's probably up there in Heaven rolling her eyes at it all and going oh-my-gosh, because she'd want to tell everyone who admires her so much that she wasn't really so different from anyone else.

For Brad and me, it is enough to know that, whatever the reason, Cassie stood up for what she believed. It is enough to know that at an age when image means everything, she was not afraid to make a stand or afraid to say what she thought.

The real issue raised by Cassie's death is not what she said to her killers, but what it was that enabled her to face them as she did. In one of his first Sunday services after the shootings at Columbine, Dave said that Cassie didn't just die on April 20, but died daily over the previous two years. At first the idea seemed distasteful, even morbid, to me. Yet the more I've thought about it, the more I've come to feel it is an important key to unlocking the mystery of her last minutes, and to understanding the path her life was taking.

Cassie struggled like everyone struggles, but she knew what she had to do to let Christ live in her. It's called dying to yourself, and it has to be done daily. It means learning to break out of the

selfish life. ... It's not a negative thing, but a way of freeing yourself to live life more fully.

The world looks at Cassie's "yes" of April 20, but we need to look at the daily "yes" she said day after day, month after month, before giving that final answer.

One day a week or so before Cassie's death we were sitting at the kitchen table, talking, and got onto the subject of death. I don't remember how. She said, "Mom, I'm not afraid to die, because I'll be in Heaven." I told her I couldn't imagine her dying--that I couldn't bear the thought of living without her. She replied, "But Mom, you'd know I was in a better place. Wouldn't you be happy for me?"

At times her thinking was so mature, it put us to shame. But it's only in retrospect--through anecdotes we've heard from her friends, and through notes and letters we've come across since her death--that we have begun to realize the depth of her innermost thoughts. In one of these notes, a scrap of paper marked "1998," she writes:

When God doesn't want me to do something, I definitely know it. When He wants me to do something, even if it means going outside my comfort zone, I know that too. I feel pushed in the direction I need to go... I try to stand up for my faith at school... It can be discouraging, but it can also be rewarding... I will die for my God. I will die for my faith. It's the least I can do for Christ dying for me.

### **REFLECTIONS**

We can't undo what happened at Columbine, but we can prevent similar tragedies from happening again. I am sure that there must be a way to reach even the most alienated, hostile teen before it is too late--before things have gone so far that we feel tempted to throw up our hands and watch our worst fears come true. If I've learned anything from Cassie's short life, it is that no adolescent, however rebellious, is doomed by fate. With warmth, self-sacrifice, and honesty--with the love that ultimately comes from God--every child can be guided and saved. I will never give up that hope.

Excerpt from *END 19*:

#### **"Do you believe in God?"**

Compiled from articles by Carla Crowder, *Rocky Mountain News*; Joseph Farah, *WorldNetDaily*; Samuel L. Blumenfeld, *WorldNetDaily*

Cassie Bernall had recently pledged to live her life according to Christ's teachings. She wrote, "Now I have given up on everything else--I have found it to be the only way to really know Christ and to experience the mighty power that brought Him back to life again, and to find out what it means to suffer and to die with Him. So, whatever it takes, I will be one who lives in the fresh newness of life of those who are alive from

the dead."

Cassie was one of the students in the Columbine school library who faced the killers head on. One of the killers pointed his gun at her and asked her the life-or-death question: "Do you believe in God?"

She paused. The gun was still there. "Yes, I believe in God," she said, in a voice strong enough so that her fellow students could hear her.

That was the last thing this 17-year-old Christian would ever say. The gunman asked her "Why?" She had no time to answer before she was shot to death.

Bernall entered the Columbine High School library to study during lunch. She left a martyr.

"She died for her faith. That's why she died and that's how she lived her whole life. She was a martyr for Jesus," said Crystal Woodman, a Columbine junior and member of Bernall's youth group at West Bowles Community Church.

Woodman, too, barely escaped from the library, and only after asking God to "send your angels down."

What is the solution to the violence plaguing our schools? There is only one solution. It's a person. His name is Jesus Christ. He came to earth about 2,000 years ago to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. His coming was foretold by the prophets for 4,000 years before He came in human form. And He's coming again--and, by all indications, very, very soon.

Cassie Bernall was ready for Him. The question Columbine should raise in the minds, hearts, and souls of every American and every human being on planet Earth is: "Are you ready?"

If some evildoer put a gun to your head today and asked you whether you knew Jesus and accepted Him as your personal savior, what would your answer be?

**(Dad:) Hallelujah! Sudden death, sudden glory! Through these few dying words, she witnessed to millions around the world and convicted the hearts of countless Christians to do more for Jesus! After all, if He's worth dying for, He's worth living for.**

**And if you're going to live for Him, why not do all you can for Him? Why not give yourself wholly to Him, body, mind and soul? Why give Him less than your best, less than a hundred percent?**

**The things of this Earth are mere wood, hay and stubble that will all be burned up one of these days. The only things that will last are the gold and silver and precious stones of works done for the Lord and souls won for Him. Lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven. Be a faithful, willing, whole-hearted witness! You won't be sorry.**

(End of file.)