

COLUMBINE SURVIVOR:

‘School shooters need help – not the death penalty’



Heidi has become a fierce campaigner for gun control

The trial of the Parkland school massacre brought back horrific memories for Heidi Cortez who’s fighting for gun control

as a ghost. She was just yelling at us to get under the tables and saying that a kid had been shot.

“I got under my table, still not understanding what was happening.”

She adds, “There was just this chorus of screams, and the entire library began to fill with smoke. I remember looking over to my right and seeing the two of them enter the library, both wearing long black trench coats, and carrying guns. Then Eric

Harris shouted out, ‘Everyone get ready to die!’”

In less than 20 minutes, Harris and Klebold killed 12 fellow students, and a teacher, before abruptly leaving the library and fatally turning their guns on themselves. They also wounded 21 other students.

Remarkably Heidi, one of 50 pupils in the library that day, escaped physically unhurt.

But she suffered years of PTSD, and accepts that each school shooting since triggers horrific memories.

Despite this, she still believes that the recent decision of a jury

in Florida, to spare Parkland school shooter Nikolas Cruz the death penalty, was the right decision.

BROKEN

On February 14, 2018, Cruz, then 19, opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 teens. Cruz’s lawyers argued he had a troubled upbringing, including allegations that his biological mother had abused drugs and alcohol. But the decision, after a three-month trial, to sentence him to life in prison, and not death, sparked furious outbursts by victims’ families.

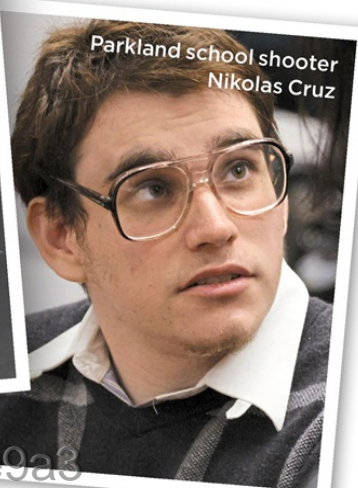
Heidi says, “I don’t believe in the death penalty. I always err on the side of mercy. This

On the morning of 20 April, 1999, 15-year-old high school student Heidi Cortez sat in her school library getting ahead with her homework. She was looking forward to trying out for a place on the cheerleading team that afternoon. A bright student, Heidi dreamt of one day becoming a doctor.

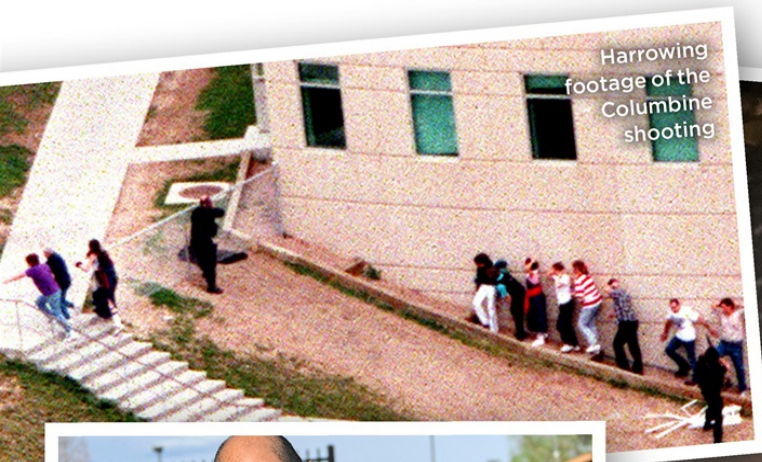
But at approximately 11:19 am, two students – Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold – both 18 and armed with assault pistols, began gunning down their fellow pupils outside Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado, USA.

Moving into the school cafeteria, the pair mowed down teenagers as they went.

Heidi remembers, “A teacher came running into the library and her face was as pale



Parkland school shooter Nikolas Cruz



Harrowing footage of the Columbine shooting



Distraught families are reunited after the ordeal



Heidi was a bright high-school student before Columbine

‘AT ONE POINT THEY WERE SO CLOSE I COULD REACH OUT AND TOUCH THEIR BOOTS’

individual seems like an entirely broken person, and I know he struggled with his upbringing.”

But she adds, “I also understand the need for justice, and I think the Columbine situation is different because they [Harris and Klebold] ended up killing themselves. I never had to face them or go to court, and I’m grateful for that. I can imagine just how traumatising that would be for the Parkland survivors and their families.”

According to *The Washington Post*, since the Columbine High massacre, at least 188 children, teachers and others have been killed in US school shootings, with another 389 suffering injuries.

Heidi vividly remembers the killing spree she witnessed at Columbine.

“I was under my table shaking, praying. As they started shooting across the library, people would scream things like, ‘You shot him up, I can’t believe it!’ But they just carried on shooting and taunting us.

“I saw them shoot the kids who had been hiding under a computer station near me. At one point they were so close I could have reached out and touched their boots as they walked past.”

TRAUMA

When the killers fled the library, Heidi and her fellow students rushed into a hallway and then outside, where police ushered them to safety.

Six hours later, she was finally reunited with her parents Kathy and Barry.

Over the coming years, Heidi spoke out about her experience, becoming a fierce campaigner for gun control.

But inside, she was still reliving the trauma.

She says, “We went back to classes at a nearby school just two weeks later, and I’d sit there planning my escape exits in case it happened again.

“If I saw someone in the street wearing a long dark coat like they did that day, I’d just freeze with fear.”

But, incredibly, she was never offered any counselling.

When she was 20, Heidi married Leo, and they went on to adopt a son, now nine.

It was only aged 25, after suffering regular panic attacks and unable to work, that she finally sought help. But the emotional scars will always be there.

She says, “When there’s a school shooting in the news

my husband or friends always warn me, so I’m aware first.”

When the Parkland shooting happened, Heidi, who’d been due to go out with friends that evening, instead stayed in and quietly reflected on the events.

Heidi – who in 2019 went to Washington to urge Congress to introduce greater gun control – says, “After Columbine everyone said, ‘Never again’. But school shootings are so common in the US now that unless there’s a huge number of people killed, it doesn’t even top the headlines. It’s still easier to buy a gun than a car in the US.”

By Jean Jollands and Katreen Hardt