

Kentucky and the Region

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Heath teen tells Congress of shooting

'The pain never leaves,' says boy who saw carnage

By JAMES R. CARROLL
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WASHINGTON — As if he needed further proof that his life was forever altered by the December 1997 shootings at Heath High School near Paducah, there was 17-year-old senior Stephen Keene yesterday, sitting before a congressional subcommittee.

At the witness table with him were two students from other schools whose names have been seared into history by violence: Columbine High School of Littleton, Colo., and Thurston High School of

Springfield, Ore.

"The pain didn't leave," Stephen said. "The pain never leaves."

"How can we help these kids get over it? They can't," he said bluntly, his voice steady, as the House subcommittee on early childhood, youth and families sat in rapt attention. "It has become a part of who they are now."

For Stephen, who saw three friends killed and five wounded, including his brother Craig, life now means trying to deal with "fear, anxiety, depression, loneliness, feelings of helplessness, loss of control and an inability to make things right."

"You can hardly control yourself sometimes because you are crying so bad," he said.

For lawmakers searching for some legislative answer to school violence, Stephen of-

fered some suggestions.

"I believe the first place to look is within our homes," he said. "Education needs to start at home with strong moral and spiritual values, taught at home and practiced in the home. We can't expect our schools to raise children."

And, he said, "we must bring God back into our families, and yes, once again, hang the Ten Commandments, as a visible sign to everyone that there is good and there is wrong, in our classrooms."

Adam Campbell, 18, who has graduated from Columbine High, said family, friends and his church helped him. But he is not sure how to help others.

"Hate will cause wrong choices," he said. "If a person has a bad heart, you cannot change it. Only God can change a bad heart. . . . I feel that our schools have done as

well as they can because you cannot change or control teen behavior. They have to make their own choices."

Ryan Atteberry of Thurston High, still carrying a bullet near his spine, said: "We all need to work together to solve our problems. We must use words, not weapons."

A few other students who have not faced such brutal violence but who have had to deal with danger in their own schools urged Congress and local officials to reduce class sizes, to train school staff to identify and help troubled youth, to encourage parental involvement in schools and to strengthen student networks that might detect threats against schools.

Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., clearly moved by the Kentucky youth's testimony, spoke to him as the wife of a

man who was killed in the 1993 Long Island Railroad shootings and the mother of a son who was wounded.

"It doesn't get any easier," she told him. "Mr. Keene, you'll never be insensitized to violence. You'll always be aware of it."

McCarthy, a leading proponent of gun control in Congress, said "easy access to guns" is a key element in deadly school violence, and she urged her colleagues to address that issue.

But Rep. Michael Castle, R-Del., chairman of the panel, said the nation "must move beyond the temptation to point the finger of blame at any one particular industry or event."

"At this point, only one thing is clear to me: There is no single solution to the problem of school violence," he said.