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Shoeloes fight clouded image

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Sept. 26 - Michael and Vonda Shoels are whisked from their rental van into the Masonic Temple in Brooklyn. It's a pleasant Tuesday night in mid-September, and the assembled masses are eager.

The Shoeloes are led to a quiet room in back, embraced by the welcoming hum of 200 people. The Rev. Al Sharpton leads the group in prayer and introduces Michael and Vonda.

They receive a standing ovation. It goes on for minutes, and Michael and Vonda exchange a surprised glance at the warm New York reception.

Vonda tells about the prophetic question her son asked just days before being killed at Columbine High School.

"We were riding down the street, and Isaiah asked us, 'Mama and Daddy, what would y'all do if somebody got a gun and killed all of your kids?'" Vonda, 33, said. "He asked us if we'd go and get guns and kill that person. We were so stunned that we stopped the van."

They told the 18-year-old, just months away from graduation, they'd never average a death with violence. "But we would go on a crusade against whatever it was that took our children," Vonda said.

Not a whisper from the crowd.

Vonda continues, explaining why for the past five months Michael has been the one doing most of the crusading.

"I'm sure everybody's seen my husband's face plastered on everything and everywhere, and heard his voice everywhere," she said. "But I just didn't have the strength to do what I told Isaiah I'd do. But I pulled myself together and, well, here I am."

The crowd erupts in applause and leaps to its feet.

Vonda looks again at Michael, 42. Later, they say the ovation showed them something they've felt for months: only in Denver are they validly in everywhere else on their national speaking tour against violence and hate - from Atlanta to Michigan to New York - they've been welcomed with open arms.

Here at home, the Shoeloes are not without their supporters, including Columbine parents - some of whom also were victimized by the April 20 shootings.

But the Shoeloes have become regular subjects of newspaper columns, letters and editorials. Many accuse them of trying to cash in on Isaiah's death, for good reason, said Peter Boyles, host of a popular morning talk-radio show.

"Are they victims or are they opportunists? Clearly they're victims, but they've got the opportunism thing going pretty strong, too," Boyles said.

"There's a lot of holes in their story, but now it's got to the point that if you say anything about them you're called a racist."

Racism indeed plays a role in how they're treated, say Michael, Vonda and their backers.

"If I were white, people would be treating me differently," Michael said. "People wouldn't be putting me and my family on trial."

Michael also blames his ex-wife and eldest daughter for stirring up controversy, especially over Michael's past.

Michael came to Colorado after marrying his first wife, Renelda Westmoreland Polk, in his hometown of Amarillo, Texas, on Oct. 1, 1977. The couple had a daughter, Makashia, in 1979, and divorced on Aug. 19, 1982.

Renelda said Michael failed to make his \$60-a-month child-support payments for years. Court records confirm it. The tab peaked at \$6,700 in 1996, documents show, and Michael's own lawyer withdrew from the case because Michael wouldn't pay her.

In the divorce papers, Michael described himself as a "disabled student" collecting \$360 a month in welfare. Michael said the disability stemmed from a back injury shortly after he married Renelda that ultimately required two surgeries and forced him onto welfare.

Renelda said the thing that angers her most is how Michael travels the country claiming to be a committed family man.

"I'm tired of him lying," she said. "Michael has not been the dedicated dad he has claimed to be on television. He didn't pay child support for many years."

Michael resolved the child-support dispute on Aug. 16 by paying \$3,720, records show. And Michael dismisses Renelda's comments as those of a jealous ex-wife.

"She's been jealous for 20 years because we couldn't make it."

Another aspect of Michael's past being scrutinized is his criminal record.

He served a three-year stint in a Texas prison from 1974 to 1977, according to the Texas Department of Corrections. He'd been on probation for burglarizing a pharmacy when police found him illegally in possession of a 12-gauge shotgun and .38-caliber revolver during a car accident, records show.

At the time of the burglary, Michael said, he was 17 when his friends broke into the place. He was just a bystander, he said.

"People are trying to pull up my history, something that wouldn't happen if I weren't black," Michael said. "I've proved myself to be a law-abiding citizen."

He was sued, however, in January 1995 by a collection agency for the Gilpin Hotel Casino for writing four bad checks a month earlier, records show. The checks totaled \$350. With penalties, attorney fees and court costs, the casino was seeking \$1,400. The case was settled in January.

Michael and the then-Vonda Moore got married in Denver on Feb. 12, 1983. She was 18, and Isaiah was already 3 years old.

Michael and Vonda have four other children ranging in age from 11 to 16: Abubaka, Melissa, Michelle and Anthony.

Since Isaiah, 11 classmates and a teacher were killed on April 20, the Shoeloes have remained very much in the public eye, as have several other victims' families.

But in addition to spreading their antihate and anti-violence message and advocating gun buy-back programs, they - mostly Michael and family spokesman Sam Riddle - continue to say and do things that generate controversy. Among them:

- Accusing Columbine teacher Patricia Nielson of saving her own life while putting others, including Isaiah, in harm's way.
- Calling for a national boycott of United Way - after its Healing Fund gave them more than \$50,000 - and claiming the United Way misappropriated the \$4.4 million fund.
- Complaining that the Healing Fund wouldn't help them buy a new house, put Michelle and Anthony - who also attended Columbine - into private school and pay for private counseling.
- Criticizing President and Hillary Rodham Clinton for renegeing on what the Shoeloes say was a promise to help them pay for a new house.
- Hiring high-profile lawyer Geoffrey Fieger to file a wrongful-death suit against the parents of Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold - and then saying the suit wasn't about money.
- Appearing with Sharpton, who has been accused of anti-Semitism and instigating riots, in New York two weeks ago.
- Going against a judge's order to release Isaiah's autopsy report.
- Appearing in a newspaper ad after winning \$15,000 at a Black Hawk casino in June.
- Keeping Isaiah's birth father from attending Isaiah's funeral.

Michael and Vonda Shoels make no apologies.

Ask them about the buzz they've created in the metro area and they shake their heads and offer a frustrated, cynical laugh. They say they're used to the stares when they go out in public, the harsh words on the editorial pages and talk shows.

But they feel misunderstood, that people aren't listening to them, somehow blaming them for what happened April 20 instead of Harris and Klebold.

"It's like we built the bombs," Vonda said. "It's like we went and got the ammo, walked into Columbine and killed the kids. That's how we get treated."

"I see it and hear it every day," she said. "You know what everybody's first question is? 'How do you feel about everybody talking about you because of the lawsuit?' What does the lawsuit have to do with anything? It was my son's life. My God, I was living just fine before all this."

Vonda said that almost everything they've done has been for a simple reason: to find out what happened and why.

"That was my son up in that school," she said. "I have a right to know what happened at Columbine. That's why I'm not going to shut up. People would love me to shut up, but I'm not."

"We're not witch-hunting," Michael said. "All we need is justice. We are trying to make a statement."

But that statement has led to some criticism from families of other Columbine victims.

"Isaiah Shoels did not deserve what happened to him," said Brian Rohrbough, father of slain student Daniel. "But as far as the rest of it goes, Michael Shoels is maybe his own worst enemy between what he says and apparently what his history is."

Rohrbough said the Shoeloes get invited to the monthly meetings of the victims' families, but haven't attended, perhaps because they're traveling. He also conceded that some answers about what happened and why on April 20 may come from their lawsuit.

Donna Taylor, whose son, Mark, was shot and wounded at Columbine, says any barbs against the Shoeloes are unfair. "They're very good people," Taylor said. "People just don't understand what it's like until they go through it themselves."

Taylor and son Mark appeared at a Michigan church with the Shoeloes in early September. She said both families were invited to Michigan by the church without knowing the other family had been invited.

Taylor also met with Fieger while they were in Michigan to consider her options, including filing a lawsuit of her own.

The Shoeloes maintain that the color of their skin has shaded the way Denver responds to them.

Students in the Columbine library that day reported Isaiah was called "n-----" before he was shot. Isaiah was one of just a few black students at Columbine, and the only African-American killed.

Authorities, however, say racism didn't motivate Harris and Klebold. The two seniors harbored widespread hatred for many groups, including athletes and Christians.

Still, the Shoeloes say the racial aspect of Columbine has been ignored. They have repeatedly described the Columbine massacre as a hate crime. And at their New York appearance with Sharpton, they called on U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to convene a federal grand jury to investigate the massacre as such.

Other minority parents whose children attend Columbine acknowledge that racism plays a role in how the Shoeloes are treated.

"At work I hear a lot of people talking about this," said parent Anthony Amaro, who is Hispanic. "People keep saying that he's only interested in commercializing his son. If he was white, I think people would accept the lawsuit and everything he has to say."

Bringing up Michael Shoels' past is irrelevant, he said.

"I don't care what his background is," Amaro said. "I don't care if he won money gambling or whatever he has done in his past. What does any of that have to do with the fact that his son was killed? These people just see him as a black person just trying to make a fast buck. I just see him as somebody trying to make a point."

A steady stream of writers to the letter-to-the-editor pages, however, say racism has nothing to do with the skepticism over Michael Shoels.

"Shoels doesn't seem to be aware that public sentiment is beginning to see through his groundless accusations right to the exploitation of his stepson's tragic death," Michael Hernandez wrote in a letter to The Denver Post published Friday.

A few weeks after the shootings, the Shoeloes moved out of their rented home on South Kendall Boulevard in unincorporated Jefferson County, about 2 miles from Columbine High.

After two years there, they say, they never felt safe on South Kendall, and Anthony and Michelle can't bear to live in Jefferson County or go to Columbine High any more.

Jefferson County sheriff's records show the Shoeloes summoned deputies to their house twice in mid-1998.

On May 25, the Shoeloes reported that five suspects were throwing pebbles at the house. One of them broke a window. And on Sept. 1, the family's garage was kicked in and burglarized. Stolen items included a tool chest and other smaller tools.

A year later, Michael Shoels now says he believes the break-in was motivated by racism, though he never made that charge to authorities at the time. He said he saw five white youths running from the house after he heard the garage door being kicked.

"(Authorities) told us that there were some kids going through the neighborhood kicking in other people's garages," Michael said. "I didn't believe them."

But sheriff's spokesman Steve Davis said such cases are common. "We're always getting reports of kids doing criminal mischief," he said.

After bouncing from relative to relative, Michael and Vonda are now staying at an undisclosed hotel while Anthony and Michelle stay with Vonda's mother in Denver.

They say they plan to close on a house in Denver in a few months. But in the meantime they asked the Healing Fund to provide them with a temporary place to live.

"We were forced out of our homes because of hate," Michael said. "So we want the same kind of assistance people get if they're forced out of their house because of a hurricane or storm. We're not asking people to buy us a house. We're asking for help until we get settled in our house."

Following the April 20 massacre, the Healing Fund gave \$50,000 to each of the families of the 13 slaying victims.

While the Healing Fund denied the Shoeloes' request to pay the first 12 months of mortgage payments on a new house, the fund did provide \$2,000 for temporary housing in a hotel and about \$900 to cover storage costs for the Shoeloes' furnishings, an Aug. 17 letter from the fund to the family shows. That was in addition to the \$50,000.

Where did the money go?

Michael said a large chunk of the \$50,000 went towards immediate living needs. They also paid for some of their own travel expenses for their national crusading tour.

"We were so angry at the time, we didn't think long term. We didn't think that we would need that money in the future," he said. "We were thinking about what we could do with that money when we had it."

As for the \$15,000 he won in June at the Colorado Central Station Casino in Black Hawk, Michael said \$4,100 was used to buy Isaiah's headstone, and the remaining money paid the bills. "I had to take care of my family."

Taking care of the family also is what prompted Michael to shut down his small independent record company and take a job with Discount Tire in Denver in 1991, he said. He had started Notorious Records 11 years earlier.

He worked for the tire company for seven years, when recurring back problems forced him off the job in 1998, he said.

Some of his back problems stemmed from an accident in 1989 when he slipped on a patch of ice at a Denver gas station, court records show. He sued Texaco, seeking about \$20,000. The case was settled for an undisclosed amount. Michael said it was about \$3,000 to \$4,000.

By the mid-1990s, Michael had revived his fledgling music company, so in August 1997 he moved his family away from their working-class neighborhood on West 12th Place in Lakewood.

The fourth-largest city in Colorado, Lakewood had its pockets of blight, and sometimes the Shoeloes' kids would find drug vials in the street as they walked to school, Michael and Vonda said.

"I moved them into a better situation because we could afford it," Michael said.

Vonda interrupts, correcting her husband: "Thought. We thought it was a better situation."

South Jefferson County seemed like it would be the right fit.

A few of their neighbors, they said, were friendly, but most were not.

"Right after we moved out to Littleton, we noticed a bunch of for sale signs going up," Vonda said. "I asked Mike why he thought that was going on. He said he thought it was because we were black."

Mark Kessinger, who has lived across the street from the Shoeloes' former home on South Kendall since 1968, says the Shoeloes were the first black family to move into the neighborhood, which he described as "exclusively white."

But that doesn't mean it's a hateful, racist neighborhood, Kessinger said.

"I've read what they've said in the newspapers and on television, and I can't say I agree with them," Kessinger said. "It's not an unfriendly neighborhood."

James Frazier lives next to the Shoeloes' former home. He moved in about the same time they did, and he also disagrees that the neighborhood excluded the Shoeloes.

"I'd go over there and help them out quite a bit," he said. He said he gave the family a dishwasher because they didn't have one.

"Just because there aren't minorities in the neighborhood doesn't mean that minorities aren't welcome," he added.

While Isaiah seemed to fit in with little trouble, the other two Shoels kids at Columbine had a hard time adjusting to a high school where most of their classmates did not.

Michelle and Anthony weren't involved in any extracurricular activities, seeking refuge in their own small cliques.

And there were a couple of incidents during the past school year. In one, Michelle, a sophomore at the time, was walking across a school field with two classmates. Two other students were coming at them and one called Michelle and her friends a racial epithet. The group started to fight, and all the parents were summoned to the school.

Michael and Vonda said school officials kept them from confronting the other girl or her parents.

"They just told us that she was suspended, and that the other students were suspended," Michael said. "They did a good job of whitewashing everything. They just covered it up."

But Jefferson County schools spokesman Rick Kaufman said the district feels the issue was resolved fairly.

"Students who were involved in that incident were appropriately disciplined," Kaufman said. "Apologies were administered by all students involved. Everyone met, and in the meeting, the girls who made the comments did apologize. There were no other incidents reported."

A few months later, Anthony Shoels, also a sophomore then, was in his history class when they began talking about Martin Luther King Jr. The teacher told students she didn't think King was worthy of a national holiday in his honor, the Shoeloes said. Anthony, the quietest of the Shoeloes' kids, said nothing in class but told his parents when he got home.

"It's hard to believe a teacher would say something like that to students," Vonda said. "That's how it was up there. Anthony and Michelle would both come home and say, 'Mama and Daddy, they don't like us up there.'"

Kaufman said neither the Shoeloes nor anyone else ever filed a complaint about such an incident. "This is the first time I've ever heard of it."

Isaiah, meanwhile, flourished. Classmates described him as a popular and well-liked student and member of the Rebel wrestling and football teams.

While Isaiah had made the football team, he didn't play. He wanted instead to focus on his studies, Michael said.

Whenever the 4-foot-11, 130-pound Isaiah missed school, teachers called to check up on him, Vonda said. When he was hospitalized for three days about a month before the shootings because of dehydration - doctors said he was working out too much - his classmates cooked breakfast for Isaiah and his family and brought it to the hospital, Michael and Vonda said.

His father says he was shy yet outgoing, a sibling and son who respected authority and didn't make waves. He was also studious. He carried a B average, looking forward to the day he'd graduate and join Michael in the record business, Michael and Vonda said. He spent lots of time in the library, especially that last semester.

On April 20, he was inside Columbine's library putting the finishing touches on a term paper for English class when he heard what sounded like gunshots.

What's saddest, Michael said, is that all of the controversy has pushed Isaiah's life, and any meaning that can be found in his death, to the bottom of their story.

"I miss my son," Michael said. "That's what this is all about."

Staff writers Kirk Mitchell and Kieran Nicholson contributed to this report.

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