

The logo for the television series FRONTLINE, consisting of the word "FRONTLINE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters centered within a solid red square.

THE KILLER AT THURSTON HIGH
PBS airdate: Tuesday, January 18, 2000, 10 P.M., 90 minutes

Pearl, Mississippi. Paducah, Kentucky. Jonesboro, Arkansas. Springfield, Oregon. Littleton, Colorado. Conyers, Georgia. Over the past two years, Americans have witnessed a startling new terror: kids killing other kids at school.

FRONTLINE takes measure of this national crisis through a meticulous journey into the life of one high school shooter, Kip Kinkel. “The Killer at Thurston High,” airing Tuesday, January 18, at 10 P.M. on PBS (check local listings), is the first in-depth television examination of what made Kip Kinkel kill. A fifteen-year-old boy from a solid middle-class family, Kip made headlines in 1998 when he murdered his mother and father and then opened fire on his fellow students at his Springfield, Oregon, high school. Two students died and twenty-five others were injured. In November, Kinkel was sentenced to 111 years for the crimes. He will never leave prison.

For more than twelve months, FRONTLINE producers Michael Kirk, Miri Navasky, and Karen O’Connor conducted a comprehensive investigation into the life and struggles of Kip Kinkel. With the cooperation of family and friends, many of whom have never before spoken publicly, and through extensive access to police and school officials, FRONTLINE focuses on the story of one boy’s life. The film is an intimate journey exploring the ordinary and telling events that—in this case—led to a crossover into unpredicted violence. The documentary features exclusive interviews with Kip’s family and friends, personal home movies, and excerpts from Kip’s writings.

“What would you find if you opened the door into a young life that had produced an unspeakable horror?” asks FRONTLINE correspondent Peter J. Boyer. “Surely you’d expect to discover a domestic landscape of dysfunction, with physical or mental abuse. Neglect. A trail of psychic wounds. But what if instead you found a nurturing home, comforting community, and loving parents recognized for their special way with children? By all accounts an ideal American family. Nothing could be more frightening than that.”

Investigating the tragedy through multiple viewpoints, FRONTLINE gained an understanding of Kip’s story that even those most intimately involved in his life could not have known. The extent of

his troubles were far more than anyone recognized. School officials and counselors remember Kip as a boyish and likeable teenager who nobody identified as high risk.

“The day after the shooting I was concerned a little bit of Kip’s past history. I pulled his file. I was flabbergasted...because nothing was there,” says Don Stone, a coach and discipline counselor at Thurston High School. Stone, like many others in Kip’s life, never noticed any warning signs that might indicate violent behavior.

In her most extensive interview, Kip’s older sister, Kristin, tells FRONTLINE stories of a loving brother who never before indicated to anyone a capacity for this kind of harm. A professional cheerleading instructor and competition judge, Kristin is the only surviving member of her immediate family. “There was no way we could have seen something this huge coming,” Kristin says.

Details of the case described in police reports reveal that on May 20, 1998, after being expelled from Thurston High School for buying a stolen .32 caliber pistol at school, Kip went home where he shot his father, Bill Kinkel, in the head and then waited for his mother, Faith, to return home from her job as a school teacher. Kip said to her, “I love you, Mom,” then aimed and fired.

After killing his parents, Kip spent the night in his house filled with explosives. He drove to school the next morning with three guns hidden under his trench coat and a hunting knife taped to his leg. Using a semiautomatic rifle, a 9mm Glock pistol, and a .22 caliber semiautomatic pistol, Kip opened fire as students gathered in the cafeteria. He emptied a fifty-round clip into the crowd of students before he was wrestled to the ground by five classmates. Kip pleaded to them, “just kill me.”

Richard Bushnell, a friend of the Kinkel family who also served as Kip’s academic counselor at Thurston High School, was shocked by Kip’s violent rage. “Every day that you go to school you know that any one of 1400 students could do the same thing that Kip did,” Bushnell says. “Kids are learning that it could happen any time, any place, by nice kids. Kip was respected, he had friends, he was liked. It can happen.”

The quiet terror and ordinary way in which Kip and his parents lost their way make for a compelling story. FRONTLINE recounts in detail the small and unnoticed wounds that shaped Kip’s interior world and examines the adolescent logic and emerging emotional disturbance that led him inexorably to these killings. “Oh God, I am so close to killing people. So close. I am evil and want to kill and give pain without cost and there is no such thing...I hate myself for what I have become,” Kip wrote.

“People want to be able to separate themselves with my family because they want assurance that this is never going to happen to them,” says Kristin. “It would be nice if you could just fold this up and put us in a little black box labeled ‘abnormal,’ stick us on a shelf, and be confident that your family isn’t like ours. To know that if [you] do all the right things, this isn’t going to happen to [your] child. I wish I could tell you that it won’t.”

Access the FRONTLINE Web site at www.pbs.org/frontline for:

- Revealing excerpts from Kip’s journal and other writings, plus his audiotaped confession;
- Additional video interviews with Kristen Kinkel, Kip’s friends, and friends and colleagues of Bill and Faith Kinkel;
- A report on Kip’s sentencing hearing, with excerpts from expert testimony and statements from victims;
- An examination of recent attempts to create psychological profiles of school shooters;
- Parents suing parents: a report on lawsuits around the country seeking to hold parents responsible for violent children;
- Plus video excerpts, extended interviews from the program, and much more.

“The Killer at Thurston High” is produced by Michael Kirk, Miri Navasky, and Karen O’Connor. The director is Michael Kirk. The correspondent is Peter J. Boyer.

Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers.

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