

*"The bully never remembers. The outcast never forgets."* — Jodee Blanco, author *"Please Stop Laughing at Me"*

# 'It's not just joking around'

*Logansport students hear about Jodee Blanco's experiences growing up an outcast*

By **DEB SAGE**

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Five years ago this month, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris murdered 12 of the classmates who had tormented them at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.

The boys then killed themselves.

Chicago native Jodee Blanco, like most Americans, watched the aftermath of the tragedy as it unfolded on TV. And for a split second, and only a split second, Blanco said her heart went out not to the families of the murdered children. Not to the 23 who had been wounded. Her heart went out to the shooters.

"Because," she said, "I understood their frustration, their anger, their loneliness."

The Columbine story made her angry. But instead of getting revenge like Klebold and Harris, Blanco wrote a memoir. Titled, "Please Stop Laughing at Me," the book was released in soft back last year. The book received no publicity before hitting the shelves. But it didn't matter. Forty-eight hours later, it was at the top of the New York Times' Best Seller list.

## 'Necessary message'

Because the book has been so successful, Blanco decided to quit her job as a Hollywood publicist and take her story where it was needed most — the schools.

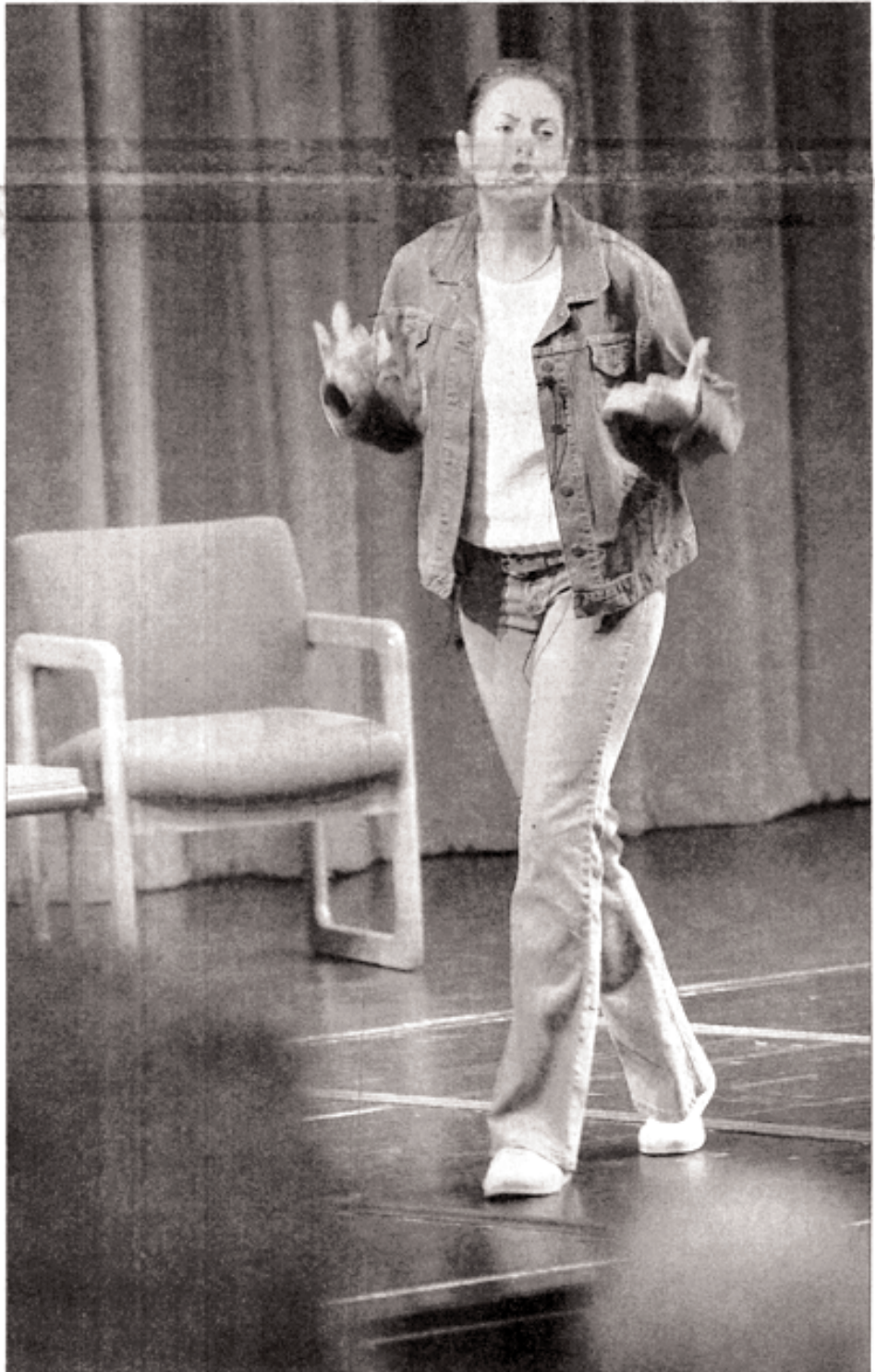
Thanks to the efforts of Columbia Middle School teacher Ann Easter, Blanco has been sharing her story with Logansport students the last two days. She's also meeting with the corporation's teachers and will have a presentation for parents later today.

Easter heard about Blanco's book from the mother of a former student. The woman had read it and told Easter she really needed to read it, too. Easter said she was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." But when she did read the book, she was "shocked and

## An invitation

Jodee Blanco, author of the New York Times' best-seller, "Please Stop Laughing at Me," will hold a workshop for parents and teachers from 5 to 8 p.m. tonight at McHale Performing Arts Center. Admission is free. Blanco will be sharing part of her story about growing up an outcast, and offering suggestions to parents whose children are being bullied.

She'll be signing copies of her book after the presentation.



Pharos-Tribune photo by Arnold Ernst

**VOICE OF EXPERIENCE:** Once a top-notch Hollywood publicist, Jodee Blanco now visits schools throughout the country talking to students about bullying. Shortly after the Columbine shootings, Blanco wrote her memoir, "Please Stop Laughing At Me," which describes her life as an outcast.

# Bullying ...

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appalled" by what Blanco had endured.

CMS Principal Kay Scott said Blanco's message is something students need to hear. "It's so necessary ... I think (bullying) goes on a lot more than we realize," she said.

Amanda Raderstorf knows firsthand that Scott's suspicions are correct. She's seen it at LHS. "Every week, there's a fight," she said. "And kids make fun of the special needs (students) all the time ... they're just kids going to high school."

Sophomore Britton Edwards agreed with Raderstorf's assessment. "There's a lot of bullying in my opinion ... a lot of it's mental," she said. One of her classmates told Blanco that an LHS student had committed suicide and they believe it was because he was being bullied.

Klebold and Harris hadn't fit in at Columbine, Blanco said. They were different. They were into Goth and Dungeons & Dragons. They listened to a different kind of music than their peers. They were considered "weird."

They were outcasts, and they were bullied.

Blanco understood their pain.

## The outcast

She wasn't into sports. She had a "big mouth" and wasn't afraid to stand up to her classmates and speak on behalf of the underdogs. Instead of playing foursquare at recess, she liked to write poetry.

The bullying started as early as first grade and continued until the day before her high school graduation. In first grade, her friends turned on her because of her friendship with another first-grader who was deaf, had a club foot and wore glasses with thick lenses and ugly black frames. Coming from a family who was poor, her clothes always were raggedy.

Her senior year, hoping for just one good memory from high school, she asked a boy she liked to sign her yearbook. His inscription, written in indelible black ink and block capital letters, was mean-spirited and hateful. He used vulgar language and wrote that she never should have been born.

That moment created a hole in her soul, she said. And it was a hole that wasn't filled until her 20th class reunion when her tormentors apologized for how they had treated her. They'd never hated her, they said. They were just joking around,

they told her.

"But it's not joking around," Blanco said.

Speaking from the stage at McHale, Blanco addressed fifth and sixth graders and then seventh and eighth graders. Her final group Tuesday and her first this morning were first- through fourth graders.

A straight shooter who doesn't pull any punches and isn't afraid to raise her voice, Blanco made sure that each presentation was age appropriate.

## Beyond mean

She told them about the day she found her favorite pair of shoes floating in an unflushed toilet and about being pinned on the ground by some wrestlers and football players. They pried open her jaw and filled her mouth with snow.

She talked about notes she was given, telling her she wasn't welcome and nobody liked her, that they hated her, that she was an abortion, that she should go to a different school. They said the same things to her face. She ate lunch in a bathroom stall as an eighth-grader because nobody would let her sit with them in the cafeteria. Kids laughed at her as she walked down the hall.

Classmates threw rocks and dirt at her. They spit on her. Her hair was so matted with spit balls that it took industrial scissors to get them out. Somebody put rotten food in her purse. Somebody threw a bloody fetal pig at her.

She stopped eating and dropped to 70 pounds. She attempted suicide. She even prayed she'd be diagnosed with cancer so she wouldn't have to go to school anymore.

Every incident, every mean word took away a piece of her. Unlike the underdogs she stood up for, Blanco couldn't stand up for herself. You can hear that you're ugly and should never have been born, that everybody hates you for so long before you start to believe it.

"Being mean is not just joking around," she said over and over again. She figures the day she found her shoes that it probably took 30 seconds to get them to the bathroom and put them in the toilet, another 30 seconds to write the note and 30 more seconds to make their getaway.

"I'm sure that the next day, they didn't even remember what they'd done," Blanco said.

But she has never forgotten.

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