Healing

the Wounds

By Roger Barrett

Photos courtesy of The Denver Post.
The quiet community of Littleton, Colo., was shaken this past April by the Columbine High School shootings, one of the worst tragedies in our state’s history. For weeks afterward you could not turn on a radio or television without hearing about what had happened. Even today, many of us still struggle to comprehend how this happened.

In the days and weeks that followed we all asked ourselves, “What can we do to help?” I got many calls from our membership offering help and support of every kind. Then I was contacted by Brent McSwain of the Associated General Contractors of Colorado. He explained that the general contractors of Colorado were uniting to rebuild Columbine High School. It was their intent to do whatever was necessary to repair and remodel Columbine for the coming school year. Without hesitation, I told them that the Colorado chapter of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International was looking for some way to lend a helping hand, and that we would be honored to join their team.

By the end of the day I had commitments from manufacturers, suppliers and contractors. We decided that AWCI would take on the restoration as one unit, spreading the workload out among as many of our members as possible. It was also understood that no company would benefit from the tragedy that had taken place.
We took it upon ourselves to do any other work we thought was necessary; it did not matter that the damage might not have been caused by the event that had taken place there.

Assessing the Damage

From early on, the AGC made it clear that they were not expecting us to donate our work. The insurance company was going to cover the costs of the construction and was waiving the deductible.

The main concern was getting sufficient people on site to finish the project on time. Colorado was in the midst of a severe labor shortage, and the clock was ticking. Everyone involved knew it would take a joint effort to meet our target date.

We as an association decided to bid the work as we would any other job and then donate the money back to the school in the form of a scholarship fund. We also felt we should make improvements wherever we could.

The following day, as I walked through the school, I knew that we had our work cut out for us. There were holes everywhere, and the acoustical ceilings were in poor condition. There were also areas where the structural integrity of the walls had been compromised. We would need to build a new wall to
block off the library where it is still uncertain what renovations will take place or if it will ever reopen. It was also known that most of the hallway ceilings would need to be taken down in order to inspect the plumbing and mechanical systems for damage.

Over the course of the summer, crews from different companies worked side by side to put the school back together. Along with the work we as an association had committed to, we also did any other work we thought was necessary, even if the damage might not have been caused by the event that had taken place there. The feeling among our membership was, “We’re here, and it needs fixing so let’s take care of it.”
The Colorado chapters of the AGC and AWCI came together to repair the damage at Columbine High School in time for the school to open for the 1999 fall semester.

At the time of this writing, all of the available work has been completed and the school has been reopened. We were also able to help with the construction of an off-site resource center that was being built nearby. The only task left undone is the library, where decisions still have to be made. One thing that is for sure though, when the plans for the library are drawn, the AWCI of Colorado will be there to make those drawings a reality.

A Voluntary Mission

I am honored to have worked on this project and I am extremely proud of our membership. Never before have I seen so many people come together and rise to a challenge. Our membership stood up and did what needed to be done with no exceptions or questions asked. I like to think we made a difference, that we took a bad situation and left it a little better than we found it.

I would like to thank all of our members and the AGC for their commitment to this project and for all their hard work. I would also wish to express our sympathy for all those who were so adversely affected by this tragedy. Although the memories of what happened at Columbine will remain forever in our minds, there will also be the memories of people coming together in a time of need.

About the Author

Roger Barrett is vice president of South Valley Drywall, Inc., Littleton, Colo., and past president of the Association of the Wall & Ceiling Industries of Colorado.