



# GIVENESS

**S**ix days after Charlie Roberts murdered five young Amish girls in their one-room schoolhouse, his family was still in shock. Outside his home near Nickel Mines, Pa., Lloyd Welk, the grandfather of Roberts's wife, Marie, could only sit and stare in disbelief. "I didn't know one person could cause so much trouble," he says. Just then an Amish family in a horse and buggy passed by. Welk smiled and waved to them and they gave a friendly wave back, a simple act of grace that also stunned him. "The forgiving is hard for them, I'm sure," he says. "It's

amazing how the Amish do that." Perhaps what's most amazing is the heartfelt depth of that forgiveness. Who, for instance, would have imagined that victims' families would insist on establishing a fund for the killer's wife and three children? That's what the Amish did, days after the massacre. Or that, according to one source, the parents of several of the murdered girls personally approached Marie Roberts to offer their forgiveness? Or that several dozen Amish people asked the Roberts family if they could attend the burial service for Charlie Roberts? John Bachman, the funeral

A window opened by tragedy allows the world a glimpse into the remarkable values of Amish life

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAWN THEWISSA, COURTESY OF ROBERTS FAMILY, PA. BARBARA L. JOHNSTON/THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/WPN



Though they cry in private, the Amish tend to be stoic in public, even in the face of tragedy. "They are quiet people," says David Nissley, a pastor with close ties to the Amish community. "They are calm; they trust in God and know the sun will rise again based on God's will."

director who handled the Roberts service, says that the killer's widow was at first astonished by the requests but quickly gave her blessing. "I hope people understand that it truly is a miracle for anyone to feel any sense of forgiveness for this man," says Bachman, who admits to harboring his own anger toward Roberts. "We all need to take a lesson from that."

It's a lesson the Amish start learning at a young age. The Reverend Robert Schenck, president of the National Clergy Council, describes visiting the home of one of the dead girls, Marian Fisher, 13, where the body was laid out for viewing. "About a dozen people were in there, including younger children," says Rev.

Schenck. "The grandfather Ruben Fisher was speaking to the children in the German dialect they use. Then he turned to me and another non-Amish visitor and said, 'It's very important that we teach the children not to think evil of the man who did this.'" Indeed, on the night of the killings, Ruben Fisher, who had another granddaughter, Barbie, 12, wounded in the attack, went to the Roberts home, hugged one of the killer's young sons, and offered the Amish community's forgiveness. "I was having a conversation with some Amish friends, and they said the Roberts family has a greater load to bear than the Amish families," says Cathy Saunders, a nurse who was at the birth of two of the girls who

“They're deeply humbled and appreciate the support people show them”

—HERMAN BONTRAGER



Roberts's family member Lloyd Welk was touched by the Amish response.

were killed, "because not only must they bear grief for losing the shooter, but also the shame and guilt."

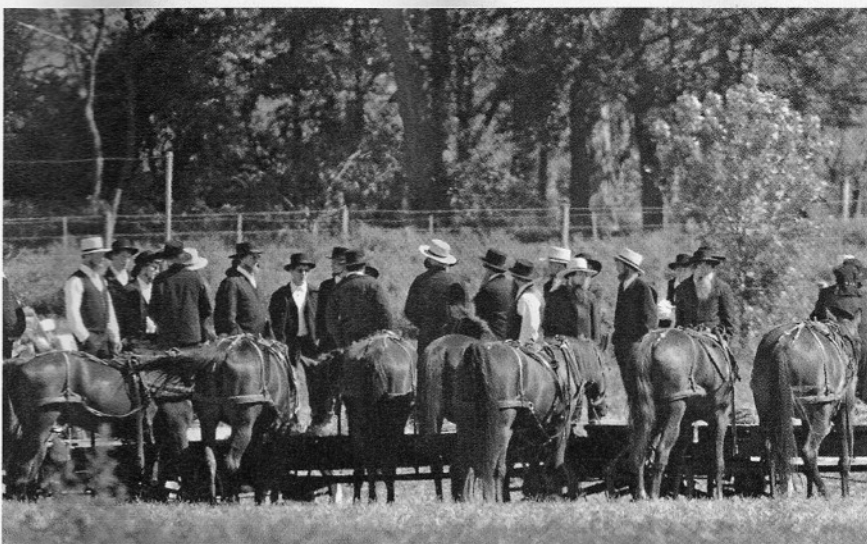
The outpouring of sympathy and support has posed some dilemmas for the Amish. Self-sufficiency is a key aspect to their way of life. They reject any form of financial assistance, including health insurance, meaning they normally must pay for all hospital costs out of their own pockets. With donated money pouring in—\$700,000 at last count—and huge bills to pay, they have decided to make an exception in this case and use the charity to cover their expenses. "They're deeply humbled and appreciate the support people show them,

including the financial gifts,” says Herman Bontrager, who has been designated a spokesman for the Amish. “They said they would be denying people the blessing that comes from giving in denying these gifts.”

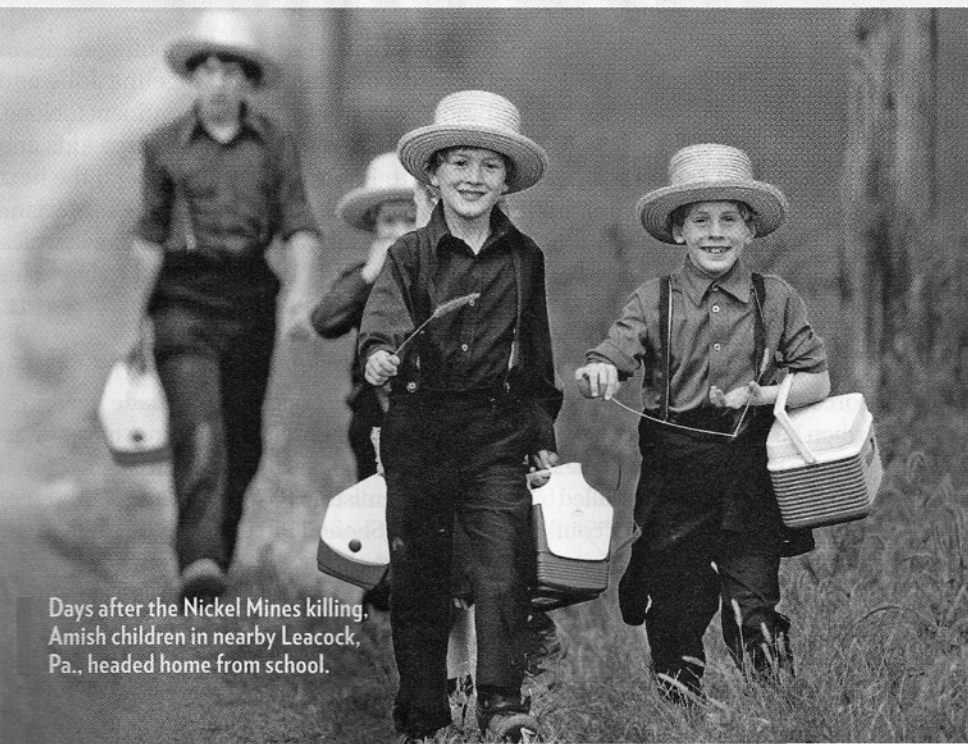
The Amish elders have already decided to tear down the schoolhouse where the shootings took place, because of the painful memories. That does not mean they intend to turn away from their pacifist beliefs by taking any real measures to make the new school safer. “Security gates are antithetical to the Amish way of life,” says Bontrager, “which is to be trustworthy and to trust others.”

In the week after the killings, the Amish did get one tiny bit of good news. One of the five girls who was severely wounded was taken off life support and returned home to die, but her condition actually improved, and she went back to the hospital. (The 6-year-old girl remains in very critical condition with a wound to the head.) Meanwhile the rest of the Amish community went about the somber task of burying their dead, each girl attired in a white, handmade dress and laid out in a pine coffin. In the unshakable faith of the Amish, the dead are truly in a better place. Midwife Rita Rhodes Reed recalls visiting the family of one of the dead, 7-year-old Naomi Rose Ebersol. Though grieving, Naomi’s father, Amos, chose to focus mostly on the fact that the youngsters had not been sexually abused, as police suspect had been Roberts’s intention. “You know, it was a battle between good and evil in that school,” he said soothingly, “and good won.” Says Reed: “That’s a tremendous thing to say when you’re standing over your dead daughter and saying that good won.”

By **Bill Hewitt**, **Nicole Weisensee Egan**,  
**Kathy Ehrich Dowd** and **Sean Scully** in  
Lancaster County



The killings cast a pall over Pennsylvania’s Amish country. Amish men gathered in Nickel Mines for one funeral (above), and a bell was readied for a countywide ringing to mark the one-week anniversary of the massacre (below).



Days after the Nickel Mines killing, Amish children in nearby Leacock, Pa., headed home from school.

Share your condolences with the Nickel Mines community, and PEOPLE will deliver them. Go to [PEOPLE.COM/AMISH](http://PEOPLE.COM/AMISH) to send your thoughts, and find out how you can help.

# Inside People



Despite their grief, the Amish were “unfailingly polite,” says reporter Nina Burleigh.

**T**he horrific shootings in Nickel Mines, Pa., created a situation that often looked like a clash of cultures but, to reporters, didn't always feel like one. Satellite news trucks next to horses and buggies made for dramatic images, but what one PEOPLE correspondent remembered most was how hard the Amish tried to communicate at a simple, human level. “I was just struck by how gracious and polite the Amish were to me, despite being in the midst of the worst tragedy to hit their community,” says Nicole Weisensee Egan. “I saw stoic, grown Amish men cry while trying to explain their feelings about what happened—but they were never rude to us.”

Over and over, says Egan, the Amish emphasized one thing: They hoped everyone would learn from the forgiveness they showed the shooter,

Charlie Roberts. Among the 1,400 hundred readers who have so far sent condolences through people.com (see below), many took that message to heart. “When I think of how the Amish have forgiven the family of Charlie Roberts, it puts so much in my life in perspective,” wrote reader Sylvia Santos. “If they can forgive, then I should be able to forgive also.”

Many readers have asked how they can help the families whose children were injured or killed. Several funds have been set up; for a list of names and addresses, please see the link at [www.people.com/amish](http://www.people.com/amish).

LARRY HACKETT, MANAGING EDITOR

## TO SHARE YOUR CONDOLENCES

Go to [WWW.PEOPLE.COM/AMISH](http://WWW.PEOPLE.COM/AMISH) to send your feelings, thoughts and prayers to the Nickel Mines community. PEOPLE will compile the messages and deliver them to the town.