

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

His own worst enemy

Victor Le's mental health was deteriorating. But no one knew to what extent until it was too late.

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gineer, whom she'd met on a California vacation and settled with in Texas. Victor was born in Lubbock in 1992, but as her marriage fizzled, Vivian joined family in Gwinnett, taking Victor with her. The marriage dragged on, though, and Sophia was born in 1995 in Snellville. Five years later, Vivian was divorced.

At the coffee shop, Vivian, 50, dabbed tears with a wadded napkin. She calls herself a "conflicted Buddhist." She believes in God, but she finds peace in the wisdom of monks, too.

She also believes in signs. The first sign came when Vivian was sitting on her couch around midnight. For a couple of seconds, through the living room window, she saw a young man in the yard, near the driveway, a vision of Victor. She was not afraid. It was Victor's way of saying he was OK, she said.

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Confrontation

Smith pointed his flashlight beam up the long driveway toward the open garage. He saw a young man partially shrouded by bushes and a Bradford pear tree. Smith recognized the clothing description provided by the 911 caller – an orange T-shirt, blue gym shorts. It was Victor. Smith demanded that he put his hands in the air.

Victor seemed deaf to the order. He inched around the tree, and then the officer could see the object in his hand.

"Drop the gun!" Smith commanded. "You're not in trouble. We just need to talk to you."

"Who called you?" Victor asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Your family called us. We're just here to make sure you're OK. They said you're having some problems."

Victor continued to slowly close the distance. Smith aimed his 9 mm handgun, his arm resting atop the mailbox.

As Victor kept walking, Smith tossed his flashlight in the street and flipped on his weapon light, both hands on his gun.

"I can't see," Victor said. "I'll turn off the light and come up there to talk to you, but you have to drop the gun."

"I can't do that," he said as he briskly approached the mailbox.

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Exceptional youth

Victor was a vibrant and happy child. At 2, he could count to 100 and back in English and Vietnamese. By age 4, he was devouring Dr. Seuss books. But he seemed easily distracted, so Vivian consulted a doctor. Victor was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. A few years later, doctors recommended medication, but fearing side effects, Vivian refused.

At Shiloh Middle School, Victor's intelligence raised suspicions among some teachers. Twice he was accused of plagiarism on writing assignments. "Your writing sounds like academia – like a book, not a student," one teacher wrote.

Victor was hurt and confused. "I saw him working late at night, so I knew that was his work," Vivian said.

Mary Lynn Huie, who taught Victor English at Parkview High School, adamantly dismissed the allegations. Writing enthralled Victor, she said. He would linger after class to discuss poems by e.e. cummings or Emily Dickinson.

Despite his intelligence, Victor had a mischievous side.

In his teens, he waged paintball wars with his friends, blew up cans with fireworks and engaged in other relatively harmless hijinks near the creek behind his home.

At Parkview, Victor was an unusual combination of brains and brawn. He won the Gwinnett County freshman wrestling title at 140 pounds,



aided by what his sister described as his "horse legs." And he breezed through gifted classes.

Ekta Patel, 20, now a student at Harvard, recalled meeting Victor in ninth grade and seeing a "cool wrestler who knew how to effectively criticize 'A Separate Peace.'" Classmate Roger Lu recalls

reclining next to Victor in the sun-warmed streets of his subdivision on summer nights, gazing at the stars. "He always told me he was going to graduate (high school) a year early," Lu said. "He told me in ninth grade he wanted to be a doctor."

From the outside, Victor appeared to have it all together.

TOP: Victor (right) is shown with his mother, Vivian, and sister Sophia during happier times in 2009. CONTRIBUTED BY VIVIAN TRINH

CENTER: When Parkview High School won the freshman Gwinnett County wrestling tournament in 2008, Victor (middle, back row) placed first in the 140-pound weight class. CONTRIBUTED BY VIVIAN TRINH

BOTTOM: Victor relished Indian culture and dancing with the Emory Karma Bhangra team. CONTRIBUTED BY SARAH NUNLEY

But internally, he was creating high expectations – and an enormous amount of pressure – for himself.

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Fallout begins

Victor charged down the driveway and raised his right arm, aiming his weapon toward the mailbox.

Convinced he was about to be shot, Smith fired a single bullet. Victor fell, landing on his back, his bare feet pointed toward the street.

In her bedroom, Vivian heard a loud bang. Afraid to investigate alone, she went to get Victor. They had chatted just minutes before, when she urged him to get some sleep and they had said goodnight.

Now she found his room empty.

Gun drawn, Smith walked up to Victor and kicked the weapon away. It sounded lightweight and plastic. It was a BB gun.

A light flipped on in the garage. It was Vivian: "What happened?" she yelled. "That's my son."

Smith asked her to step back inside as officer P.D. Ward pulled up. He helped corral the home's occupants – Vivian, Sophia, cousin James Pham and his mother Monique, a Realtor who owned the home – as they gathered in the garage. Having seen Victor sprawled on the ground, Vivian began to feel ill.

Who called 911? Ward asked. No one answered.

Ward ushered the family into the house and began to question them. That's when Vivian's blood pressure shot up dangerously high. She was

transported to the hospital.

Meanwhile, Smith stayed with Victor, trying to find a pulse and securing the scene.

Cpl. D.C. Appleby arrived and, knowing Smith would be shaken by the ordeal, asked if he was OK. Smith told Appleby he'd just called his wife and was contemplating a call to his father.

Inside the house, Appleby turned to James – the suspected 911 caller – for answers. But James said there had been no turmoil that night; he said Victor must have made the call himself.

Dispatch records showed the call had come from Victor's cellphone. Appleby dialed the number and followed the ring tone to the garage, where Victor's phone chimed on a workbench. Atop the phone lay a folded, handwritten note.

A crime scene specialist unfolded the paper. It was clear that Victor had never intended to hold up a gas station. Instead, all the night's events were the careful orchestrations of his suicide.

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College conflict

Vietnamese culture teaches the young to respect elders, and Victor embodied that. At Wal-Mart, he would help elderly women unload their shopping carts at the register. On vacation, he would buy gifts for his mother, but never himself.

But as his last year in high school wore on, Victor became tense and would snap at his girlfriend, sister and mother over trivial things. Sophia once commented to Victor that it was her birthday, and he shot back, "Who cares?"

On the fast track to Emory, Victor was taking courses at Georgia Perimeter College at the time, effectively combining his junior and senior years of high school in a process known as joint enrollment. With all his time spent on academics, he'd had to quit wrestling.

Huie wasn't surprised to see Victor graduate high school early. In his college recommendation letter, she wrote: "Few students I have ever taught could manage what he has done this semester."

In May 2010, Victor graduated high school with a 4.0 grade point average. Without studying, he scored in the 2200 range on his SAT – 2400 is perfect.

But Patel, Victor's friend, noticed that the confidence he'd typically projected was waning. "He kept saying that, in his efforts to gain a year, he had lost one instead," she said.

In his college application essay, Victor was clearly torn between his ambition and the advice of close friends – and especially his mother – to slow down and enjoy his youth.

"Some worry, even foresee, that my initiative will be my downfall," he wrote.

In fall 2010, Victor started at Emory. He moved into Harris Hall dormitory and planned to major in neuroscience and behavioral biology. He joined the Tobacco-Free Task Force as a student representative and landed a legislator spot on the College Council. He made friends quickly.

But Victor was struggling with his classes for the first time. He diligently studied his biology, chemistry and philosophy books, but couldn't retain the information.

Whatever worries Victor may have harbored were masked by his new-found passion: Emory Karma Bhangra, a co-ed group that performs Indian folk dances in vibrant costumes.

Dance partner Sarah Nunley said Victor was wholly in the moment when he performed, shouting "Dil bole haiippa!" Translation: "My heart says hurray."

But late that first semester, Victor made a troubling phone call to his mother. He could not concentrate in class lectures or remember his readings, and he wanted to see a doctor.

Vivian made two appoint-