

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

ments, but he skipped both. He began to talk to Patel about leaving the university to explore the world. He told Nunley he was considering joining the military. His first mention of suicide may have come in a Dec. 6 online chat with Patel.

"tell me the truth, when did you suddenly (sic) become like this (suicidal)?" Patel wrote.

Victor: "I'd say within the last couple months"

Patel: "was there one specific thing?"

Victor: "i don't think so"

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Justified action

Medics arrived on the scene and found Victor lifeless in the driveway, 37 feet from the mailbox. An investigator pronounced him dead.

Victor's weapon was collected. A Crosman-Phantom BB gun, it was designed to look like a semiautomatic handgun.

At Gwinnett police headquarters, Smith's actions were under investigation. In a white-walled interrogation room, he fidgeted and soberly answered questions.

"When I was out there, it seemed (Victor) was going to continue towards me until he made me do something," he said.

Police recruits are taught to aim for "center mass" – the chest area, the big target – where bullet strikes cause rapid loss of blood pressure and then unconsciousness.

Shooting weapons from the hands of perpetrators or dropping them with shots to their extremities "is exceptionally difficult, even on a still target," said Cpl. Jake Smith, a Gwinnett police spokesman and no relation to the officer who pulled the trigger.

That night, an officer told the family: "We're trained to stop the threat. If our lives are in danger, we have to defend ourselves."

As is protocol, Smith was placed on administrative leave and met with a counselor.

By the week's end, Smith was cleared of wrongdoing. Officials eventually ruled Victor's death "suicide by cop."

Rebecca Stincelli, a crisis interventionist, calls this form of suicide a "growing phenomenon." Her 2010 study, "Suicide By Cop: Victims from Both Sides of the Badge" claims it accounts for about 10 percent of all suicides.

But in Gwinnett, Victor's incident was rare. Only one other fatal shooting in 2012 qualified as a "suicide by cop," according to homicide detectives.

"No officer wants to have to shoot someone, and certainly not someone who's having a crisis," said spokesman Cpl. Smith. "These are generally not bad guys we're dealing with, (and incidents) can be trying for the officer in the aftermath."

So trying, in fact, that Stincelli likens the effects to post traumatic stress disorder in some cases. The period when officers are being investigated can be especially difficult, as they grapple with emotions, knowing their split-second decisions are being analyzed for fault, she said. Some even quit their jobs.

Smith remains employed by Gwinnett police. He declined an interview for this story.

Victor's deterioration happened quickly, a finger-snap in Vivian's memory.

He finished his first semester at Emory with A's and B's. During his second semester, however, he moved back home and told everyone he was commuting to classes. In truth, Victor quit college, flunking everything, including swim class.

That summer, Emory informed Victor he was suspended for one semester. At first he blamed his poor grades on partying, but then admitted he was depressed.

This set off alarms for Vivian, signaling that he needed professional help. He was diagnosed with major depression and ADHD, and prescribed the antidepressant Zoloft.

After a couple of months, Victor proclaimed himself cured and Vivian agreed to let him stop taking the pills. The psychiatrist visits waned, too.

To right his grades, Victor enrolled in Georgia Perimeter College that fall, but he earned unimpressive C marks. He slept a lot and started smoking marijuana. He'd quit working out and was changing physi-

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At her home in Duluth, Vivian Trinh arranges items on a makeshift shrine during a ceremony honoring Victor's life on the first year anniversary of his death. KENT D. JOHNSON PHOTOS / KDJOHNSON@AJC.COM



James Pham looked up to his cousin, Victor, as though he were a brother. They lived together in the Lilburn home owned by James' mother, Monique.

cally, his chiseled masculinity softening, his face growing boyish. His hands started to shake, and he worried that his dreams of being a neurosurgeon were slipping away.

The next semester, Victor was readmitted to Emory. (Officials at Emory confirmed Victor's enrollment, but declined comment.) He commuted for one week before telling Vivian he needed a break.

Vivian would come home from work to find him on the couch with one of his books from adolescence. "I'm reading, Mom," he'd say.

But every day, the book was open to the same page.

A friend advised Vivian to take Victor to a hospital. Surprisingly, he agreed. A doctor at Eastside Medical Center pronounced a new, more ominous diagnosis: Schizophrenia.

After two days of testing, doctors decided to transfer Victor to Peachford Hospital in Decatur, a mental health service provider. He ripped off his hospital gown and dashed through the corridors of Eastside Medical as his mother screamed for him to stop.

A security guard thwarted the escape, but once back in his room, Victor bashed his head into the wall.

Victor stayed at Peachford for three weeks, but he begged to go home and convinced Vivian to help him get released. She enlisted her family counselor to vouch for Victor, reduced her work hours so she could be home to care for him and agreed to enroll Victor in an outpatient program.

"He will be safe," she promised.

Six months before his death, Victor walked out of the hospital and triumphantly threw his hands up into the springtime air: "Ahh!"

It wasn't long, though, before Victor told his mother he heard voices telling him to hurt the family dog. Vivian called a Peachford hotline, and they advised her to immediately readmit him.

By then Victor had calmed down and went to bed. When

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A home video captures Vivian spreading Victor's ashes in the Gulf of Mexico over Labor Day weekend.

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By summer, Victor showed improvement. A new combination of Prozac and antipsychotics seemed to help. He set his sights on returning to Emory again.

A month before he died, Victor wrote a letter to Emory officials explaining his poor performance in an effort to reclassify his failing grades as withdrawals. He was permitted to return and enrolled in two classes. But after only two weeks, he realized his problem with reading retention had not subsided.

Vivian believes Victor's purpose for living was finally, totally lost.

His letter for readmission foreshadowed his end, said Vivian. He'd been consumed with suicidal impulses at Emory, Victor wrote. During the semester he'd quit school, "I had hoped to acquire a gun to end myself ... or a toy gun in order to threaten a police officer into doing it for me."

While "suicide by cop" might seem like a selfish act,

Buckley said it demonstrates a schizophrenic person's scrambled thinking.

In her interviews with "suicide by cop" survivors, Stincelli found that most perpetrators had not been able to bring themselves to pull the trigger themselves. In police, they saw an easier out.

Huie, Victor's English teacher, has pondered her student's death and its effect on others, especially the police officer he goaded into shooting him.

"You think about the impact and how it ripples out," said Huie, "and all the people – the living – whose lives are torn by it."

In his suicide note, Victor said: "If I could live another 20 years exactly as I lived the first, I would, but I sense that destiny has something else in store for me."

Victor's funeral was held in Lawrenceville the Sunday after his death. Beside him in the casket, Vivian laid out his Bhangra costume, his sports trophies and stacks of adoring letters from friends and family.

The following Friday, the dance team dedicated a performance to Victor at Emory. Instead of their usual vibrant costumes, the dancers wore black.

The outpouring of support did not soothe for long, though.

"We were just lost," Monique, Victor's aunt and James Pham's mother, said.

Last summer, Vivian and Sophia moved to Duluth. The home they had shared with Victor was too saturated with memories. She decorated the new home with Buddhist calligraphy and two glass cabinets so full of her children's photographs they can only be described as shrines.

Sometimes Vivian can accept that Victor is gone. She

ABOUT THE REPORTER AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Josh Green is a freelance journalist and fiction writer who lives in Atlanta with his wife and daughter. The Indiana native has won top awards for journalism in the Hoosier state and in Georgia, where he relocated to work for the Gwinnett Daily Post in 2007. His debut book, "Dirtyville Rhapsodies," was named one of Atlanta magazine's top 10 books for 2013.



Kent D. Johnson is a veteran journalist with more than 31 years experience. He joined the AJC as sports photo editor in 1998 and has held a number of visual editing and shooting roles at the paper since, including photo assignment editor for nine years. Johnson also worked at papers in Charlotte, N.C., Jackson, Miss., Fort Myers, Fla., and Muskogee, Okla.



ON MYAJC.COM

See more photos for the Victor Le story at www.MyAJC.com/personaljournneys.

Here's what our readers have to say about last week's Personal Journeys:



Great piece on Pat Conroy and the death of Santini. Keep up the good work. Joe Dabney, Brookhaven

Tell us your Personal Journey at personaljournneys@ajc.com.

tries to stay active, to host dinner parties, to attend Buddhist retreats and read Buddhist literature.

But more often, Victor's absence leaves her feeling empty and she's reminded of his nightmare decline. When she looks back, she sees a landscape of missteps.

She wonders if she should have monitored Victor more closely and coddled him less. Just maybe, taking him to see mental health professionals more frequently would have given him hope. She feels remorse, not just for the loss of her son, but for the role of officer J.J. Smith was forced to play in Victor's death.

Reflecting on Victor one night in her living room, Vivian said, "I did not act quick." She then repeated the phrase twice more before her voice trailed into a prolonged silence.

At other moments, though, she has found hope – and in seemingly mundane places.

Behind their Lilburn home one day, Vivian saw what she believed to be a second sign.

She was standing near the grave of "Dude," a spunky little mutt Victor had found in the street and adopted. They were inseparable until Dude was struck by a vehicle.

On Dude's grave, the most unusual butterfly lit, all black wings with little specks of white. It was Victor's spirit, Vivian said.

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COMING NEXT WEEK
A challenge over beers at the Hooters in Canton led Danny McWilliams to build the Nautilus in his yard. But the question remains, is it sea worthy?