

Father's pain drives his passion - Since his son - Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities (MN) - June 15, 2019 - page 01B

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An alarm sounds at 10:35 a.m., snapping Don Amorosi's mind back to what he lost.

The weekly cellphone ping marks his son's official time of death, the moment deputies killed 16-year-old **Archer Amorosi**.

It all happened so quickly. The suicidal teen burst through the front door of his Chanhassen home last July brandishing a hatchet and a handgun-style BB gun, charging toward officers. Two officers opened fire as his horrified parents stood nearby.

Nearly a year has passed since the shooting, but Don Amorosi can't stop fixating on the details. On how he thinks it could have ended differently.

Now Amorosi is fighting for meaningful reforms in how police respond to mental health calls. The mission has brought him before elected bodies — from the Chanhassen City Council to the Legislature — to plead for additional training and resources to help teens in crisis.

He relentlessly pressures local politicians and school administrators, who sometimes try to placate him with what he calls "empty commitments" to explore the issue. But he says he won't stop trying to change the stigma around a disease that doesn't discriminate.

Since Archer, eight Minnesotans have died at the hands of police while in a mental health crisis.

"In each of those situations, the families would have been better off if the officers hadn't shown up at all," Amorosi said from his Wayzata home. "As parents, we cannot second-guess whether to call 911."

Of 183 fatal police shootings across Minnesota since 2000, at least 75 of those shot had a history of mental illness or were in the throes of a mental health crisis at the time of the shooting, according to a recent Star Tribune analysis. In response, a handful of agencies have piloted programs that pair officers with mental health specialists on emergency calls.

Advocates support the expansion of those measures but say they have limitations.

"If there is a weapon involved, [crisis teams] are not equipped to go in. That's not their training," said Sue Abderholden, executive director of the state's National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Deadly force by Minnesota law enforcement results in approximately 12 to 15 civilian deaths each year. The trend has prompted the state Department of Health to conduct a homicide review chronicling all fatal police encounters since 2017. Researchers plan to perform case studies on the

deceased to determine what may have led up to the confrontation — then recommend changes to prevent future tragedies.

“We’re not going in assigning blame,” said Mark Kinde, from MDH’s violence and injury prevention unit. “We’re committed to an honest and transparent look at the data, asking ... what went wrong?”

Unlike an investigation by the state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, which focuses on whether an officer’s use of force was justified, the MDH one would take a more holistic approach, scouring autopsy results, 911 transcripts, psychological records and even school disciplinary files to determine any variables the system may have missed. Kinde hopes the findings will ultimately improve social service safety nets statewide.

In Archer’s case, it may shed light on how a talented teenage athlete wound up in a fatal standoff with Carver County sheriff’s deputies.

“My son was a popular, bright, kind young man with many gifts,” Amorosi told state lawmakers in February. “I can’t bring him back — but God willing, I can be a voice that saves other equally precious lives.”

A fight for influence

Every so often, Amorosi receives a welcome reminder: “It’s not your fault,” an uncle texts him.

Sometimes he struggles to believe it.

In the weeks before the shooting, Archer had stopped taking his medication for anxiety, depression and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. “He thought it was a sign of weakness,” Amorosi said. “Try and convince a football player — who was told he needs to gain 20 pounds by next season — that he has to take a drug that causes loss of appetite.”

The incoming junior at Minnetonka High School also struggled with anger issues and had become increasingly hostile to authority, relatives said. But that was a side he allowed only a select few to see.

To most, Archer was a charming young man with long blond hair and a bright smile. Football parents called him “Hollywood,” a nod to his chiseled features. He planned to try out for varsity quarterback this fall.

Amorosi fears his son was part of a generation faced with mounting pressures to perform — academically, athletically and socially — without enough emphasis on simply being happy.

“Collectively, we don’t get it,” he told parents and mental health professionals during a March presentation at the Blake School. “They have problems that we never had.”

Amorosi, a pharmacy services executive, expressed deep concern about the results of a 2016 student survey. Statewide results showed nearly one-fifth of all Minnesota 11th-graders had seriously considered suicide. Roughly the same number reported feeling down, depressed or

hopeless more than half of the days in the past two weeks.

The solution, he said, was to push for more mental health services inside schools. Days earlier, he'd trekked to the State Capitol to testify in favor of expanding school-linked mental health. The bill went on to pass.

Amorosi also scheduled meetings with Minnetonka school administrators, delivering an ever-growing list of demands he believes will improve student culture and reduce stigma. The district approved only one: a tree planted on school grounds in memoriam of Archer.

Superintendent Dennis Peterson rejected his request to perform a case study on Archer's journey through the school system to determine whether there were any missed opportunities for early intervention, saying it would only create further confrontation between the Amorosi family and school officials.

"We don't see anything productive about [it]," Peterson said.

Amorosi's persistence has made himself a nuisance in some corners, but a welcome crusader in others.

Michelle Gross, president of the watchdog group Communities United Against Police Brutality, said Amorosi uses his position of privilege to connect with decisionmakers in a way that forces them to listen. He, along with the affluent south Minneapolis neighbors of police shooting victim Justine Ruszczyk Damond, has driven increased donations to the group's Stolen Lives Fund.

"It wakes up more people that look like them and are in their same economic strata," Gross said. "This could really happen to anybody."

Activist groups like Black Lives Matter and Justice for Justine have invited him to speak at their rallies. The day after ex-MPD officer Mohamed Noor was convicted of third-degree murder in Damond's death, Amorosi joined protesters on the steps of the Hennepin County Government Center to lambaste law enforcement and the BCA. He accused police agencies of fostering a culture of "silence, self-preservation and deceit."

Andy Skoogman, executive director of the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, said local departments owe their communities transparency about how officers are trained and the policies that guide their actions during difficult calls.

"We must address these fears together if we want to change these incredibly tragic outcomes and restore the public's trust," he said.

Many ways to remember

Minnetonka High School football and lacrosse games bring Amorosi solace. It's one place he doesn't have to talk about the shooting. One place where parents greet him with a warm smile and big hug.

This month, Archer would have played in the boys' state lacrosse tournament. Instead, his friends are wearing A12 stickers on their helmets to honor their fallen teammate.

Many of those boys will play in the inaugural Northern Lights Lacrosse Tournament in Shorewood this August, a fundraiser Amorosi developed through his new nonprofit, Archer Aim. Some festival proceeds will go to a scholarship fund for two Minnetonka High School graduates who have overcome adversity related to mental illness.

Frequent projects are his way of trying to cope, said Amorosi's fiancée, Sara Ratner. "Some people crawl into a hole and become paralyzed. Not Don."

Soon he'll be forced to clean out Archer's bedroom, where he sometimes sleeps to feel closer to his son. For months, it's remained a shrine to the teenage boy who collected nutcrackers, sports memorabilia and Tom Brady quotes.

But now Amorosi and Ratner plan to sell the home and, hopefully, escape some painful reminders.

Every Friday, Amorosi picks up flowers and heads to the cemetery. He plops down beside the patch of grass at Archer's grave overlooking Lake Minnetonka. At 10:35 a.m., his cellphone vibrates with the ringtone "I'll Be Missing You" by Puff Daddy.

He lets it play.

The phone still holds a dozen angry voice mails Archer left in his final days. Amorosi can't bear to listen, but he can't bring himself to delete them. He'll leave them there, just in case he needs to hear his son's voice again.

"I failed him down here," he said, choking up. "I can't fail him up there."

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