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A family failed

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Posted: Sunday, August 6, 2006 12:00 am | Updated: 11:42 am, Wed Dec 7, 2011.

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Four years later, family still copes with loss

Jon Robbins' friends and families have run the gamut of emotions in the last four years since he died of a gunshot wound on a hot, September night in his Gilroy home. They felt anger – first at Robbins for what police and medical examiners ruled a suicide – then at a man they now suspect may have killed their son and friend.

They felt betrayed by local law enforcement agencies that put little effort into an investigation of Robbins' death and made mind-boggling errors along the way, such as failing to perform an autopsy of Robbins.

But for Sandy Ludlow, Robbins' mother, the worst feeling over the course of the years has been the jolt of sadness that hits her off-guard in moments when she forgets her son is gone. She still catches herself at times, when she can't remember the name of a song, reaching for the phone to call her son.

"I could call him anytime and say, 'Remember this song?' and he could remember the name and the artist," Sandy said. "Those are the things that hurt the most – the smells and tastes and sensory memories. It's just silly things I'd never even thought of."

After his death – when they believed Robbins had committed suicide – Sandy had his ashes buried in New Jersey, where they had lived

"I spent six weeks thinking nothing but that he wanted to be in New Jersey," Sandy said. "I buried him in New Jersey because I thought he wanted to go home and that's why he [committed suicide]."

A friend of Robbins' gave her a spirit feather that had a little bell that he said could call a lost loved one.

"I would hit that feather and ask [Robbins] how he could do this," Sandy said.

In her search to understand her son and work through her feelings, Sandy attended a support group called Compassionate Friends, but felt she couldn't relate to the other members.

"Parents talked who had lost a child to suicide," Sandy said. "I left thinking there was no way he could have done it."

Months after Robbins' death, and after the case had been closed by the Gilroy Police Department and the Santa Clara Coroner's office, the Ludlows became

convinced that Robbins had not killed himself. They began to believe Oswaldo Gonzalez could have been responsible. Gonzalez had been a friend and employee of Robbins' girlfriend, "Debra." Shortly after his death, Gonzalez was convicted of one charge of felony stalking against Debra – a woman he had been obsessed with for years.



A family failed

"Those are the things that hurt the most – the smells and tastes and sensory memories. It's just silly things I'd never even thought of," said Sandy Ludlow, talking about coping with the death of her son Jon.



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More recently, Sandy has attended meetings of Parents of Murdered Children. She found she could relate to the stories told by family members there. Many of the families share feeling of betrayal by the justice system that failed them.

"If Compassionate Friends is full of angst," Sandy said. "The meetings of Parents of Murdered Children could go up in flames with all the rage."

For Robbins' stepsister Lisa Bradner, the sadness hits her when she thinks of the life her brother lost.

"I definitely have moments where I just break down," she said. "When I feel like he got so robbed ... I just don't have the words for how devastating it is to see someone you care about and grew up with just so robbed."

Aside from the everyday moments that catch them, the holidays are especially hard.

"This Christmas was the hardest," Debra said.

Her grieving process was interrupted when she started receiving threatening letters from her stalker.

"The first [Christmas], I was in shock. I tried to hurry up and get through the second one," Debra said. "This was the hardest one. It's sinking in and I'm missing him."

Her son, who is now in high school, also feels the loss of his father figure. He attends high school, keeping himself busy with schoolwork and sports.

"I'm so proud of how well he is doing," Debra said.

At the Ludlow household, Robbins was always given the honor of putting the tree top on the Christmas tree as the tallest member of the family. His mother is an avid decorator for the holidays – covering every surface in the house with red, white and green Christmas ornaments. But for the first three years after his death, the family settled a small tree on a table and decorated it just with ornaments Robbins had collected over the years and ones with his name on them. The Ludlows sent ornaments with Jon's name on them to family and friends to remember him.

For the first time since his death, in December 2005, Sandy brought out the Santa and Snowmen decorations and filled the house with them.

"Christmas was hard after he was gone because it was so much a part of us," she said.

His birthday, too, is a hard moment.

"March 31 is Jon's birthday," Sandy said. "We go to the Spaghetti Factory in San Jose. We go out with the girls [Robbins' stepsisters] and order his favorite meal."

Sandy has found other ways to cope with her grief. She has planted a memorial garden in Robbin's honor. Always an avid gardener, she started a special corner in the backyard for Jon after friends of the family gave her two trees.

"Gardening is just healing," Sandy said. "Digging in the dirt and planting."

Along one wall sits a Japanese maple with reddish leaves, one of the first plants used to christen the memorial garden. The garden lacks a theme and instead Sandy and Al focused on creating an atmosphere. Many of the plants thrive in the shade cover built over the garden and a sun umbrella shades the patio area. It took a couple years to finish the garden because at first Sandy became overwhelmed thinking about her son when she worked in the backyard.

"I wanted it to be shady and cool and peaceful," Sandy said. "I like looking out and looking at his trees."

While the garden is full of greenery, it is ever-evolving as the couple adds new plants or moves other ones around.

"The garden helped me establish a connection with life," Sandy said. "It is a reminder that everything has a purpose."

But family and friends continue to search for closure in Robbins' case as they move on with their lives – which could include reopening the investigation or simply apologies from the organizations that let them down.

The Medical Examiner-Coroner's office has changed their practices since Robbins' death – a change which included taking back responsibility for deciding when autopsies will be performed and taking two blood samples for each body they handle, one to send directly to the lab and one to keep in the office – to guard against throwing out blood samples by accident as they did in Robbins' case.

"It's so wrong that everyone won't admit they didn't do a good job or try to change what they do," Sandy said. "We want people to know the facts of what an average person has to do."

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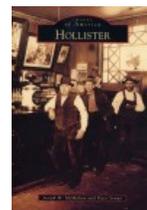


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Melissa Flores City Editor



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