

An 'Unwitnessed Death'

Essex family seeks answers, gun reform after son's suicide

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By Susan Reid
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Heartbroken and mystified over their teenage son's suicide almost five months ago, Essex parents Ge Wu and Shuwan Xue are still searching for answers and, at the same time, reaching out to other parents and teenagers in the hope that another tragedy might be averted.

Aaron Bing Xue was 15, an Essex High School freshman and the school's No. 1 singles tennis player, when he took his life behind the school library on the night of Friday, April 17, 2009.

He used a handgun belonging to the family of another youth. That youth had taken two guns and ammunition from his home earlier that day and hid them in a wooded area near Aaron's house. This is a fact that police can confirm, Essex Police Captain Brad LaRose said, but because the case involves juveniles and Aaron's death was classified as an "unwitnessed death," certain information must remain confidential.

Aaron's mother Ge Wu and father Shuwan Xue said they have become frustrated by unanswered questions in their son's death and they are concerned about juveniles' easy access to guns. Wu and Xue (Shoo-ay) argue that if Vermont's gun regulations weren't so lax, their son never would have been in possession of a weapon at a vulnerable time – and he would still be alive today.

The couple spoke to The Essex Reporter last week about the son they lost, their worries about guns in the community and their wish to reform Vermont's laws on the use and possession of firearms. They also harbor the hope that someone might know something or have seen something that day that might help shed light on their son's death.

"We lost Aaron," Shuwan Xue said. "We want his life and his death to turn out something positive for this community. We want to petition the Legislature to see if we can push through better, tighter gun control. We want to get the issue out in the open..."

"There is a lot of stigma around suicide. I don't feel that. I feel overwhelming sorrow for Aaron."

The sudden, violent death of Aaron Xue, a tennis star, honor roll student, cello player in the Vermont Youth Philharmonia, beloved son and brother, shocked his family, friends, coaches, teachers and neighbors. Rumors began to swirl. Parents worried about the safety of their own children.

John Halligan, a former Essex Junction resident who lost his son Ryan to suicide on Oct. 7, 2003 and has since become a national speaker on the issue of bullying and suicide, agreed that "it's important to let the community know what happened here.

"This should be a wakeup call for any parent with a gun lying around their house," Halligan said in an interview. "If the gun had not been there, this would never have happened."

At 6-foot-1, Aaron was a man in size, but a boy "in his face and mind," his father said. He was gentle and generous-hearted, a leader who excelled in athletics, academics, music and videogames, his parents said. Born in Pennsylvania, Aaron had lived in the Lang Farm neighborhood of Essex since he was 2½ and he considered himself "a Vermonter, a real Essex boy," his father said.

Life was good. On March 29, just three weeks before Aaron's death, he and tennis partner Cody Yu of South Burlington had beaten two strong adult players to become the Liberty Mutual Mud Season Champions and on the same day, Aaron played his cello at a recital at the Waldorf School in Shelburne. This was the Aaron his family knew: accomplished, confident, happy, with a loving family and plenty of friends, some of whom had been with him since pre-school; a boy who read every new volume of Harry Potter with his sister, page by page, sitting side by side.

Wu and Xue, who married in their native China, came to the United States in 1985 as graduate students at Boston University. They both took positions at the University of Vermont in 1996, he in research on cochlear implants and she in teaching physical therapy, where she remains today. They moved to Essex because they were told the community was safe and the schools were good, Wu said.

In September 2006, Xue accepted an opportunity as chief scientist for a small technology firm in Boston and now commutes back to Vermont on weekends. Their daughter, Emily, a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, was co-vice president for the Essex High School Class of 2008. She was very close to her younger brother and it was to Emily that Aaron left a farewell phone message before his death.

Tracing the events of that day – Friday, April 17, 2009 – Aaron's parents are trying to piece together a series of peculiar circumstances and out of character behavior that ended with what can only be explained as an impetuous, irrational act. Here was a boy who was very careful with his body, was not a risk taker and couldn't stand the sight of blood, even from a small paper cut, his mother said. "For him to take that step," Wu said. "We just don't understand it."

According to Aaron's teachers and friends, April 17 was "quite a normal day" for Aaron, Wu said in a four-hour interview last week in the family's home. Shuwan Xue spoke from his workplace in Boston by the Internet technology Skype.

Just hours before Aaron's death, the teen was at tennis practice after school, relaxed and joking with his coach, Xue said. Earlier in the day, however, Wu said Aaron, who was

generally “open and cheerful” with most of his friends, had been observed being quiet and withdrawn while in the company of the juvenile to whom the fatal weapon was later traced.

After tennis practice at EHS, Wu said, Aaron went home briefly and then at about 5 p.m., he went to the nearby Essex Shoppes & Cinema area where neighbors reported seeing him, and he was his usual polite and friendly self. Aaron then met two youths and they went to the Oriental Wok where Aaron paid for their meals, Wu said.

Sometime in the late afternoon, the three went to a wooded area off Essex Way about 200 yards from Aaron’s house, and the juvenile who had taken the two guns and ammunition from his home showed the weapons to Aaron and the other youth in a hiding place under a tree root and leaves. Police said the evidence is that the boys looked at the guns and left them there. “These were hidden so they would not be found,” LaRose said.

At about 7.45 p.m., Aaron and one of the two youths went into the Hannaford store while the third stayed outside. Aaron took a bag of candy, “Gummy bears or something,” his mother said, with a value of \$2.73. Aaron was caught and police were called. The other youth was in a different aisle at the time.

Aaron, with \$10 in his pocket, admitted to the police officer what he had done and he offered to pay for the candy, Wu said. The police officer, following procedure, drove Aaron home and issued a citation. Essex Police Chief Leo Nadeau noted that because police are restricted in what they can say about a case involving juveniles, including the deceased, they would not verify that Aaron had been caught shoplifting, and it was up to the family if they wanted to share that information.

As Aaron sat in the police car, Xue said, he was apparently sending text messages to the two youths, “Something like, ‘I got caught, you guys go.’” The officer went into the home with Aaron and spoke with Aaron’s mother for about 15 minutes, leaving the house at about 8.35 p.m., Wu said.

Wu then sat down with Aaron and asked him what had happened; why was he shoplifting? She talked to him for about 15 to 20 minutes, she said, dumbfounded by his strange behavior and spelling out the consequences – that he was not to hang around those boys anymore, not even at school, before and after classes. She also told him he would lose the privilege of having his cell phone. She said that after Aaron’s death, she asked his friends and local shopkeepers if Aaron had ever shoplifted before and the answer was no. “Aaron shoplifting candy worth \$2.73?” Wu said. “This is not him.”

That night, Wu recalled, when she spoke to her son about the shoplifting, he did not answer her questions. He was quiet, saying only that he was sorry, and he excused himself to go to the bathroom and then went upstairs to his room. At about that time, his cell phone showed, he received a text message from one of the two youths asking him how he was doing.

After going to his room, Wu said, Aaron came back downstairs with a flashlight. He started to put on his shoes and said to her, “I’m leaving. I’m sorry. I love you.”

Wu remembers trying to grab his arm and ask him where he was going and she felt him literally “slipping out of my grasp,” as he headed out the door. It was about 8.55 p.m. She never saw him alive again. She went outside to chase him, but she knew she was no match for her athletic son, and she got in the car and started to drive around the neighborhood looking for him. After about 10 or 15 minutes of looking, Wu said, she called 911 for help and police came and helped search the neighborhood, but eventually broke it off. At that time, her husband was making his usual Friday night commute home from Boston.

At 9.25 p.m., Aaron was recorded on the Essex High School security camera going inside the main entrance of the school, entering from the east side, the couple said. Aaron was wearing a light T-shirt and there was no sign of a gun. Inside, he went to the public phone and made three tries to call his sister Emily on her cell phone, finally leaving a short farewell message for her on the third try. Emily asked that details of the message be kept private.

Aaron then left the school, exiting on the west side near the ice rink, and again there was no gun in sight on the security camera tape, Wu said.

All night, the couple frantically searched for Aaron, looking around the school, on the school buses, at his favorite places like Indian Brook, Racquet’s Edge, The Essex resort complex near the family’s home. Police had rejoined the search and helped look through the school’s classrooms. A police dog was also brought in to the search past midnight, but was unsuccessful.

Early in the search, Wu said she phoned three times the cell phone of one of the two youths who had been with her son earlier and received evasive answers about Aaron’s whereabouts. She said she asked him to tell her son that she was looking for him and to come home. In one of the calls, Wu said, the youth told her, “I’m sorry about your son.” After Aaron’s death, in questioning the youth what he meant by that, Wu said he told her he meant that he and the other youth thought Aaron might do something stupid that night. Reflecting on it now, Wu said Aaron could have been saved if the youths had come forward with that information.

At about 5 a.m. the next morning, Xue and Wu discovered their son behind the school library. “When I saw him, he looked peaceful,” Xue said. “I saw something like a bruise on his forehead and I thought he fell, maybe he fell down the hill and hit his head against the wall, but then I saw something between his knees and that was the gun.”

He said he picked up the gun by the butt and looked at it, stunned, and then quickly put it down.

“I was touching his neck and his face,” Xue said. “I was calling ‘Aaron.’ I was trying to see if there was a pulse, and I didn’t feel it.”

The police officers who were helping with the search joined the parents and said that because it was potentially a crime scene, Xue and Wu could not stay with Aaron.

The next morning, police confirmed, someone alerted them to a message that was written on the school tennis courts. The writing was thought to have been done with a bullet, Wu said.

“Aaron Xue,” it read. “I (symbol for heart) my family.”

Since that day in April, the couple has been asking why. Why did their son with so much good in his life and so much promise do this? They cannot believe that a small crisis like a shoplifting incident and the removal of privileges would lead to such a desperate act.

Xue described his son as “the good kid – he listened to the teachers and to his parents ... he was not a risk-taker. When he was little, and the day care took the kids to a gym for the first time, all the kids went tumbling on the mats but Aaron watched for a long, long time before he would jump in. It had to be safe for him to try it.”

The toxicology report indicated no alcohol or drugs in his system, the couple said.

They wonder if he was dared, pressured, manipulated into behaving the way he did that night or if there was some other unknown motive. What were the youths planning to do with the guns? Was Aaron alone when he died, the family wonders.

Brad LaRose of Essex Police said there is no evidence to suggest that anyone was with Aaron at the time of his death. “We have done the best we can with the circumstances of this case,” LaRose said. “We’re comfortable with our findings. Whether it was assisted suicide – we have pursued that – and haven’t come up with any information along those lines.”

LaRose said police also have no evidence that the guns were brought into Essex High School on the morning of April 17 by the juvenile who took them from his house. Guns are not allowed in schools in Vermont under state law.

Worried EHS parents had heard rumors that the guns had in fact been at the school, and Wu said the other juvenile told her when she interviewed him after Aaron’s death that the guns were in the school that day. What he told her, she said, he later retracted when police spoke with him. The juvenile and the family who owned the guns have declined to meet with her, she said.

The youth and his family did not respond to The Essex Reporter’s request for an interview, and the second youth declined to speak about Aaron’s death.

The case is no longer being actively pursued by police and the two guns are in evidence with Essex Police – “and that is where they will stay,” LaRose said, adding police don’t believe the juvenile has access to other guns. “Parenting has taken care of that,” he said. The second gun was discovered in a mail box in the Brickyard area by a homeowner who alerted police.

Aaron's parents said they waited for a more complete picture to come from the police, but they learned nothing new. Because Aaron's death was classified as an "unwitnessed death," the police report remains sealed should someone come forward in future with new facts on the case which police could then corroborate with the confidential details in the report, LaRose said.

LaRose said he understands the family's frustration, but police have shared as much information as they can and some elements of the case will remain within the sealed report. "Heaven forbid new information gets torpedoed because too much information had been released, and we can't verify the new leads," he said.

LaRose and Police Chief Leo Nadeau said they are sympathetic to the grieving family and they would like to be part of any public gun safety education program they plan. Nadeau added that he is planning to release information about gun safety, and his department offers free locks to gun owners.

"Our heart goes out to the family," LaRose said. "We try to support them and try to bring closure, but of course you can't ever really bring closure with something like this.

"We did a very comprehensive job of this. The State's Attorney knows the case inside and out. They know exactly what we have done. We are very confident of the facts. There will always be room for speculation and theories, but as far as the logistics, the forensics...that is the evidence. Aaron took his own life."

After Aaron's death, searching for answers, Wu and Xue familiarized themselves with Vermont's gun laws. Born in China where guns are far less prevalent than in the United States, they were surprised by the accessibility to guns and the minimal punishment for infractions in Vermont.

They hope to change Vermont law so there is direct adult supervision over guns; guns are locked up and juveniles cannot access them; and parents are liable if a juvenile causes harm to himself or others.

When asked if there were any consequences in this case under Section 4008 of Vermont law, "Possession of firearms by children," in which a child under 16 is not allowed to have possession of a pistol or revolver without parental consent – or the child will be deemed "delinquent," Nadeau said: "We have dealt with this case accordingly and worked with the State's Attorney's Office and that particular section of the law."

LaRose said that delinquency holds a different consequence for juveniles – it's counseling rather than punishment.

John Halligan, whose son Ryan took his life after being bullied when he was 13 and in 8th grade at Albert D. Lawton Intermediate School in Essex Junction, has spoken with Wu and Xue and given them the support and understanding that only a fellow traveler on this grim path can give.

Like John and Kelly Halligan, Wu and Xue heard hurtful rumors after their son's death – that it was “an Asian thing, trying to achieve too much,” Xue said, or that Aaron felt pressure because his sister was such a good student, or that Wu and Xue were divorcing. None of this was true, they said, and they felt compelled to speak out about it. In fact, the source of the rumor about Aaron's parents was traced back to the youth who provided the guns, Wu said.

Halligan said he commends the couple's determination to tackle Vermont's gun laws, noting that it will be “an uphill battle.”

Aaron's death, he said, has brought into sharp focus all that can go wrong with young people and guns.

“Why didn't they have the gun locked up?” Halligan asked. “Why was there such easy access? What was the boy's intent with the gun? None of it is good, and it should highlight to the public this long-standing issue of gun use in Vermont. Young people shouldn't have access to guns, whether the intent is for a criminal act or if it's a matter of easy access to guns at a moment when the kid isn't thinking clearly – when they're being a typically impulsive teenager.”

As school begins at Essex High School, parents are joining Aaron's family in trying to bring the issue of gun safety and suicide prevention into the open and ensuring that students are educated about the issue.

In regards to suicide prevention, Essex High School Principal Rob Reardon wrote in an email, “All teachers and staff experience mandatory trainings, at the beginning of the school year, which educate staff on the necessity to report any scenario where a student threatens harm to anyone or oneself. Other topics of the trainings include bullying, harassment, etc.

“Our guidance and counseling department is well trained to meet with students identified with any safety issues, including suicide. In the past few years, all teachers experienced what we referred to as Non-Academic Obstacles to student learning. This included working with students who experience anxiety, depression, etc., and who to report to.”

Carole Renca, one of the Essex parents joining Wu and Xue in their gun reform campaign, said “speculation, rumors and a lack of understanding about what happened to Aaron have contributed to emotional distress as well as apprehension regarding teen gun violence in our community. It has also prevented us from making local decisions about how to help protect youth from future tragic incidences with guns.

“Parents of teenagers in our community specifically want to know about how we might have prevented Aaron, a 15-year-old, from obtaining firearms in our community. As parents of teenagers, we want to be informed and become more aware of high risk teen behaviors here in Essex and we want to remain vigilant in helping to keep our youth safe especially regarding gun violence.”

Wu and Xue said they want to express sincere gratitude to friends, parents, neighbors and people they don't even know for the compassion and support they have given them. "They are the ones who gave us comfort and strength," Wu said.

Now, Wu and Xue said "the family wants to give something back by sharing Aaron's story, and by effecting changes in gun control and suicide education to ensure the safety of other teenagers like Aaron."

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NEWS@ESSEXREPORTER.COM | 462 HEGEMAN AVE. SUITE 105 COLCHESTER, VT 05446 | 802.878-5282 | FAX 802.651-9635

"There is a lot of stigma around suicide. I don't feel that. I feel overwhelming sorrow for Aaron

-Shuwan Xue

Aaron Xue's father

IN 2007, Ge Wu, Emily Xue, Aaron Xue and Shuwan Xue traveled to China to visit relatives. This family portrait was taken during that trip

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE XUE FAMILY

Public Forum

Ge Wu and Shuwan Xue with a group of concerned parents, are planning a public forum for later this month to tell their son's story and urge Essex police and school administrators to be proactive in educating young people and their parents about gun safety and suicide prevention. Watch The Essex Reporter and our website for details about the meeting.

[Learn more about gun laws](#)

