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A family failed: Gilroy man's death shrouded in doubt

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A family failed: Gilroy man's death shrouded in doubt

Sandy Ludlow looks at a portrait of her son Jon and sisters, from left, Laura and Lisa. Jon's death in 2002 has left a hole in a tight-knit family.



Posted: Sunday, July 23, 2006 12:00 am | Updated: 11:42 am, Wed Dec 7, 2011.

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Four years after the shooting death of Jon Robbins, family still longs for answers

Editor's note: The untimely, violent death of a son or daughter is perhaps the worst emotional trauma a family can suffer. But when the circumstances of that death are unclear, when no closure is afforded, and when answers remain shrouded, the grief begins to take on a life of its own.

When the body of 33-year-old Jon Robbins was discovered in the bedroom of his Gilroy home on Sept. 29, 2002 – a bullet hole in his right temple – it marked the beginning of an investigation that by some accounts was dramatically flawed – so much so that it has given rise to a body of evidence that suggests the official ruling of suicide may have masked more ominous facts in the case.

What follows is a story – broken into nine parts over three weeks – that Pinnacle city editor Dennis Taylor and Gilroy reporter Melissa Flores spent four months researching. It constitutes interviews with more than a dozen sources intimately familiar with Jon Robbins, his death and the investigation that followed.

The streets jutting off Wren Avenue in north Gilroy are the epitome of working-class suburban neighborhoods built in the early 1960s. The streets are lined with liquid ambar trees, lawns are manicured and green and the houses are close together – neighborly. The fact that no one heard the gunshot that killed Jon Robbins in his bedroom on Sept. 29, 2002, seems odd.

Yet the silent pistol shot was only one in a string of peculiar circumstances surrounding the 33-year-old man's violent death.

When a "man down" call came in at 6:06 p.m. on that Sunday, firefighter crews from Engine 71 – two short blocks away – responded and found Jon Robbins lying face down in bed. A hole was visible in the right side of Robbins' head near his temple. Blood spatter covered a pillow, a headboard and a nearby wall. He had no pulse.

Robbins was declared dead at the scene.

The original 911 call had come in from Robbins' girlfriend who was had been living with Robbins for seven years. The girlfriend had arrived back in Gilroy earlier that day from a trip to Reno with a friend.

"When I walked in the shades were drawn down, which was odd," his girlfriend recalled of the humid 100-degree September day. Friends and family knew that, as

a large man, Robbins was uncomfortable in heat. A comforter was pulled up past his shoulders.

"What are you still doing in bed?" his girlfriend teased as she approached the bedroom. "I shook him and he didn't respond. I felt a coldness

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come over me. He was 6 feet 7 inches tall and weighted 300 pounds, not overly overweight but he was a big guy. I thought it might be a heart attack. He had gained so much weight that last year."

But as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw the head wound and the blood and called 911.

After firefighters and police officers began to arrive, Robbins' girlfriend made the call she was dreading – to Sandy Ludlow, Robbins' mother.

Al and Sandy Ludlow had just returned to Morgan Hill from a trip to New England and had been home unpacking that Sunday. Sandy Ludlow recalls thinking at one point, "Gosh darn that Jonny, he hasn't called to ask about our trip. He's going to get it when I see him."

"My daughter Laura called to see how our trip was, and no sooner had I hung up from her, the phone rang again," Ludlow said in an interview last month. Despite having known her son's girlfriend for more than seven years, she didn't recognize her voice.

"It was a different voice, and it was screaming 'Sandy, you need to come, Jonny's dead. He's dead!'" Ludlow recalled. "I still couldn't recognize it and thought someone was playing a sick joke. Then she said, 'Sandy, it's me, Jonny's dead.'"

"She was hysterical," Sandy said. "There was so much agony in her voice."

There still is. Four years have passed, yet both mother and girlfriend still fight back tears each time they're asked to recall the events of that evening.

Al and Sandy Ludlow jumped into their car and drove the 10 minutes down to Gilroy and the home Robbins and his girlfriend were sharing. Sandy's mind was a flurry of speculation – too many possibilities spinning inside her brain to let her heart shatter just yet. Was it a heart attack? After all, Jonny was overweight. Did it have something to do with his acid reflux disease? He is – was – only 33.

Meanwhile, GPD Officer Felix Figueroa and Crime Scene Technician Maribel Gutierrez had arrived on the scene and reported finding Robbins lying face down and being covered "up to his shoulders" with a comforter. Later, when shift Sgt. John Sheedy arrived, he determined death was from an apparent gunshot wound, and radioed for Det. Jack Robinson and Det. Dan Zen, investigators with the Gilroy Police Department.

At about 8:30 that evening, Santa Clara County coroner's investigator Andrea Wagner arrived, and with help from technicians, rolled Robbins onto his back. Sandwiched between his right hand and chest was a Rossi 38-caliber revolver, according to Wagner's coroner's report. In his left hand was a photograph of Robbins and his girlfriend.

"We found no signs of foul play," Zen wrote in his report. Later, when Zen interviewed Ludlow, Robbins' mother, he would ask her if she had any idea why her son would commit suicide.

"He had asked questions about suicide, but he was so professional that I thought it was just part of routine questioning," Ludlow said.

Zen asked about Robbins' relationships, his financial status and whether he used drugs. Other than drinking and smoking a little pot in the past, Ludlow answered that her son was in a sound relationship and his life was on track.

Then the detective asked whether Ludlow knew her son owned a gun.

"Are you trying to tell us something?" Ludlow recalls asking. Zen told her he believed Robbins had committed suicide.

Zen and Gutierrez collected the 38-special, four rounds of ammunition taken from the gun, and an empty shell casing Zen indicated was from a fired round. The unfired bullets were mixed – some being standard lead hollow-points, and others so-called "blazers," which hold lead pellets – effective primarily at short range.

On the surface, the scene appeared to point to a suicide – gun found in the victim's hand, and a photo of his girlfriend in the other hand – but as Zen would soon learn, nothing in Robbins' life would indicate he was distressed, certainly nothing that would push him to take his own life.

Robbins' mother and girlfriend both told Zen that he had no financial problems, and that his relationship with his girlfriend was in good shape, according to a report filed 48 hours after the shooting. Robbins did not use drugs, outside of drinking beer and some occasional pot – not a cocktail that would drive a man to kill himself.

Zen interviewed friends of Robbins and his girlfriend, and he again was told that Robbins was in good spirits, things were going well at work and that the friend found it difficult to believe Robbins would kill himself. Interviews with Robbins' neighbors conducted by private investigator Ed Elliott turned up the same description – he was in good spirits all day.

"We [the friend and Zen] spoke for some time and found nothing that would indicate either a suicide or a homicide," Zen stated in an addendum the next day.

On Oct. 3, Zen brought Robbins' girlfriend into the Gilroy Police Department for further questioning. "Upon completion of the interview, we found no evidence of foul play nor did we find any indications of motive for suicide," Zen said in police reports.

Zen was anxious to see the coroner's report.

The coroner's investigator, Andrea Wagner, found on external examination of Robbins' body at the scene that it was consistent with a single, close-range gunshot wound to the right temple. But in an investigation report filed the following day, Sept. 30, Wagner wrote that, despite there being an apparent exit wound on the left side of Robbins' head, "the expended round could not readily be located by this investigator or police with an extensive search."

Wagner also noted that she had provided Robbin's girlfriend and Ludlow with a pamphlet with the autopsy protocol. The body was taken to San Jose where a closer external examination was conducted, which included notes indicating that blood spatter was found on the back of the right hand, apparently enough evidence to conclude that the cause of death was a gunshot wound to the head and the manner of death was suicide.

The body was immediately released to Habing Family Funeral Home in Gilroy where it was cremated a short time later. An autopsy was never performed and the coroner's ruling was signed a week later by Parviz Pakdaman, M.D.

But for Sandy Ludlow and Robbin's girlfriend, the case was anything but closed. Initially they were tormented over why Robbins would kill

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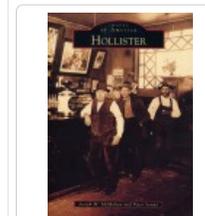


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himself, but the harder and longer they thought, the more certain they grew that something had gone terribly wrong.

Next week: Why the investigations by both Gilroy Police and the medical examiner's office went awry.

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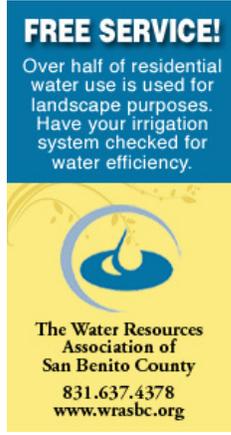
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Melissa Flores City Editor



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