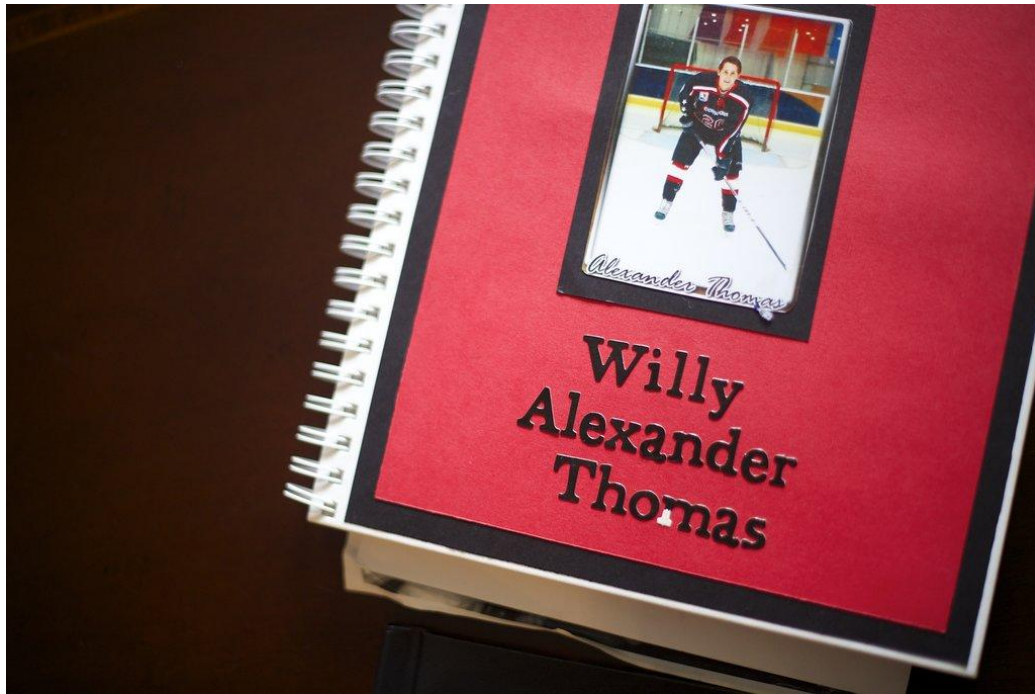


HOCKEY

A Year Later, Trying to Comprehend a Young Hockey Player's Suicide

By PETE CROATTO OCT. 25, 2014



Remembering a Son, a Sibling and a Teammate

Credit Mark Makela for The New York Times

Willy Alexander Thomas, a star junior forward, helped revive the hockey program at the Pennington School in New Jersey. He was also an integral part of a nationally ranked youth hockey team.

Willy, whom his family and some friends called Zander, was, by all accounts, confident, fun-loving and outgoing. He was not the most skilled athlete, but “he was an amazing competitor,” said Nolan Stevens, a former player for Team Comcast, the youth club, based in Pennsauken, N.J.

Jeremy Hall, Zander’s last Team Comcast coach, said, “He had a personality about him that, in the locker room, everybody just kind of flocked to.”

Yet on Oct. 27, 2013, Zander drove about 70 miles from the Hamilton, N.J., home of his girlfriend, Avalon Bastecki, to the George Washington Bridge. He parked his 2003 Volkswagen Jetta midspan and wrote text messages to her and his parents at about 6 p.m. Then he jumped to his death. He was 17.

His parents, Cathy and Graham Thomas, were at a birthday party. The message from Zander read, in part: “If it didn’t happen now, it’d be an endless cycle of madness. It’s not either of your fault.” They rushed to their home in Yardley, Pa., and tracked Zander’s phone to the bridge. The Thomases alerted the Port Authority police.

Bastecki, then a Pennington School senior, had just finished soccer practice when she read Zander’s text, urging her to be successful and absolving her of blame.

Earlier that day, she said in a recent phone interview, Zander told her, “If I were to die, you are the person I would want to spend my last moments with.”

To try to make sense of Zander’s suicide, the Thomases turned to science and hindsight. Zander, who his parents said had been taking medication to treat mild depression for about a year, received his first concussion diagnosis a month before his death. After sitting out three weeks, he was cleared to play for a college showcase tournament in New Hampshire in late October.

“He did everything that we needed him to do in terms of showing that his brain was recovered,” said Dr. Christina Master, a [sports medicine specialist](#) at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, who then monitored concussions for Team Comcast.

The wait to be cleared was too long, in the opinion of Zander and his parents. Yet Zander had complained of unabated headaches, taking ibuprofen or acetaminophen most days for more than a year before the concussion, the Thomases said. He twice said he had blacked out on the ice; his parents said they thought he did not know the meaning of the term.

The Thomases now believe that Zander must have sustained numerous subconcussive injuries, trauma to the brain that does not produce the symptoms associated with concussions. They also suspect he had multiple undiagnosed concussions throughout 15 years of playing hockey and soccer.

All of those injuries, the Thomases concluded, contributed to Zander’s depression and pain. But they will never know for sure. Zander’s body was not retrieved from the Hudson River for two weeks, and, his parents said, his brain was no longer suitable for study.

His friends and teammates seemed unaware that Zander was hurting. If they had known, “there are 1,500 people that would have stepped up to the plate,” said Rich Brusco, a veteran team manager for Team Comcast.

“Every time I saw him, he was laughing,” said Ryan Bailey, then the hockey coach at the Pennington School.

“You good, man?” was Zander’s usual greeting.

“It didn’t really seem like anyone took the time to ask him if he was O.K.,” said Ethan Samuel, Zander’s friend since third grade and a Pennington classmate. “And that’s something I regret not doing.”

The Thomases do not blame hockey or the doctors for his suicide. They have stopped blaming themselves. What Zander did was “illogical and nonwillful,” Graham Thomas said.

Besides, the Thomases have their hands full, raising three other children and supporting a cause: preaching the discretion they did not exercise.

They are working with the Sports Legacy Institute, a nonprofit organization whose mission includes studying and treating brain trauma in athletes, to introduce concussion education to Philadelphia-area schools. Eventually, Graham Thomas, 46, who runs an insurance

brokerage firm, and Cathy Thomas, 47, an elementary school teacher, want to devote all their time to the [Untold Foundation](#), which they started to educate parents, coaches and athletes about concussions and to raise money to prevent teenage suicide.

Cathy Thomas now advises: “You don’t have to get back into the game. We were so anxious: ‘Oh, my gosh, Alexander has to play this weekend.’ Let your brain rest and be safe about it.”

In an email, Chris Nowinski, a co-founder of the Sports Legacy Institute, wrote, “There are many variables involved with suicide, and so little research has gone into the concussion connection that we do not know which variables are more significant than others.”

Regarding concussion research, Master, the Children’s Hospital physician, said, “We really still are at the tip of the iceberg.”

Team Comcast and the Pennington School defended their responses to concussions. Pat Ferrill, the president of Team Comcast, said the organization’s goal was to emphasize player safety regarding all injuries.

Bill Hawkey, the Pennington School headmaster, said Zander’s death had made the school more aware of its response to concussions.

Zander’s family wants his life to stand for more than instructional pamphlets and mournful what-ifs.

“He’s so present in the whole house,” his mother said. A battered metal hockey goal sits in the driveway. His equipment bag and three hockey sticks stand by the front door. His photos are everywhere. In the Thomases’ kitchen, Zander’s last recorded height, in 2011, is marked in pencil. Above it, someone wrote, “10/27/2013.”

The Thomases — including Culley, 15, Elias, 12, and Maddie, 10 — speak of Zander all the time: Look how beautiful the sky is; it must be Alexander’s doing. He’s sending us a sign.

“We talk about it so freely, and I think so openly, that it becomes part of their new normalcy,” Cathy Thomas said, referring to Zander’s siblings. “He’s not with us on the actual earth, but he’s with us in spirit. We’ve instilled it in a very loving kind of way.”

Zander’s suicide has had a lasting effect on the young people he was close to.

“I feel I had to grow up really fast, because it’s something no one knew how to handle,” said Bastecki, his girlfriend, now a freshman at the University of Central Florida, where she is pushing herself to be more outgoing. “It did take me out of that high school girl fantasy.”

Kevin Kerr, a former Team Comcast player, is with a junior hockey team in Kearney, Neb. Initially, he was bored. Then he thought, What if Willy were here? Now, he goes fishing and hunting.

Zander continues to inspire current Team Comcast players.

“I think of him every shift I take, every stride I take on the ice,” said Ryan Conlin, who tattooed Zander’s uniform number, 20, on the back of his left shoulder, with hockey sticks forming a cross. He dresses at the stall that Zander used.

Overlooking a pond on the Pennington School’s 54-acre campus, a wispy willow tree was planted in Zander’s memory on Oct. 1, which would have been his 18th birthday. A solitary puck sits by its slender trunk.