

South Tahoe's police chief shares lessons from son's death

Publisher's note: *South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler's 21-year-old son, Alex, died last week. The following is a letter he wrote to his staff that he asked Lake Tahoe News to publish.*

By Brian Uhler

I thought it of value to write colleagues in public safety about my son so you might recognize our important role in helping families and people with addiction problems. I do not ask for specific action, but hope you seek to make a positive difference in your own way when the opportunity comes.

Alex was the rare sort of person, having a pure and good heart who truly cared about others even more than he did about himself. Those who met Alex casually would know him as a highly regarded student at Queens University where he worked on special projects involving gene mutation and the probable pigmentation of the eyes on dinosaurs. One professor recently wrote, "I'll remember Alex for his unending curiosity and his wonderfully dry wit." He added that Alex "had a love of learning that was unsurpassed by his peers."



Alex Uhler

He explained that he liked Alex for his “sharp mind, his interest in science, his interest in issues of the world, but also for his unassuming manner.”

When he was about 10 years old, I was driving past a homeless man holding a sign “hungry, please help”. Alex asked, “Daddy, can we give him some money?” To this, I explained, that giving him money would just lead to him buying beer or something. Being quick of mind, even at this young age, Alex says, “Well, can we buy him a hamburger then?” Touched by his sweet nature, I said, “Sure, son.” And we helped that homeless man with a burger.

As a Boy Scout, Alex would take special care of the younger scouts. He would never belittle or make fun and was known to help the “underdog” without second thought.

One day, about two years ago, Alex came home beaming that he had just eaten 10 tacos at Taco Bell. When I asked, he explained that he was driving in San Francisco and he saw a man trying to push his broken-down Cadillac from the road. The man couldn't push hard enough so Alex stopped his car and offered a helping hand. When they finished, the man unexpectedly insisted that Alex take \$20 for his kindness. Alex immediately rewarded himself with as many tacos as he could eat.

Growing up, Alex was always a great helper, ever ready to help

lift something or participate in a project. I came to respect his intellectual abilities many times over. Typically, I would be struggling with a problem and Alex would glance at it, without any effort at all, and say, "maybe you can...." Sure enough, more often than not, his suggestion would be right.

When he was young, I would tend to dismiss his ideas, but as I progressed in life, I learned that I should listen to Alex.

His sharp mind and amazing ability to recall information was very clear to people who knew him well. You could ask Alex a question about some obscure fact and chances are he would recite an answer like he was reading it from a textbook. As we who were closest to Alex have come to know, his brilliant mind was often racing and restless. Even as a young child, he found it difficult to go to sleep. His mother and I would take turns lying with him, combing our fingers through his hair until he would drift off to sleep.

Many years ago, when Alex was young, he said, "Mommy, I think there's something wrong with me." We didn't think much of it because every visible indication was that Alex was fine (good grades, scouting, sports, etc). Later in life, we learned that Alex struggled with anxiety that was most troubling when he was alone. As a family we helped him in many different ways. Unfortunately, each time we did things to help Alex, we unintentionally burdened him with an inner conviction and determination that he would not hurt us more.

This is what led Alex to conceal his addiction to virtually everyone. I believe with all my heart that he didn't want to be the cause of anyone's pain, let alone those he loved most.

On the day the photo was taken, Alex and I started the hike at about 5pm. We took a little less than three hours to make it to the top. At first, he took the lead, boldly making progress up the mountain. Each time I'd fall a little behind, Alex would stop and wait patiently. This happened a couple times.

Then he stopped and fell-in behind me. After about an hour of more hiking, I asked, "Hey, buddy, you staying back there so you don't make your old man feel bad, right?" He said, "Yeah, dad, something like that." Later that evening, it got cold, we got lost, and had only cell phones to light the way. At one point, he said we should find shelter and wait for daylight. Stubbornly, I refused. Now, I'd give anything to huddle with my buddy on the side of a cold mountain.

Specific information about the memorial service to be held this Sunday will be forwarded later. The family asks that no flowers be sent. Instead, a donation in Alex's name to a Queens University scholarship fund will be appreciated. This information will be forthcoming.