

LATHROP - The crowd that gathered at Woodfield Park has thinned by about half since 80 people congregated for the first time in 2009, but the Lum family's commitment and compassion has not wavered in the two years since Jeremy Lum died.

His parents, his siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends continue their Justice for Jeremy fight to honor the memory of the Lathrop native and University of California, Berkeley, graduate whose body was found in the San Joaquin River three days after he'd been released shoeless, phoneless and walletless from the San Joaquin County Jail in 2009.

He'd been arrested around midnight on July 8 on suspicion of being drunk in public, was released seven hours later and never seen alive again.

His family held its first vigil a month after Jeremy's death, and on Friday, the second anniversary of his arrest, about 40 people gathered to remember.

"I thought it would, but it hasn't gotten any easier for me in the two years," said Jeremy's father, Jerry Lum. Just as he did immediately after his eldest son's death, Jerry Lum wonders where the humanitarianism was on the day his son, who suffered from bipolar disorder and was hallucinating and paranoid resulting from a recent change in medicine at the time of his arrest.

He continues to ask, "Couldn't one person in the sheriff's office, or the officers assigned from the sheriff's office to serve as Lathrop Police Department officers, have called someone in the family at the time of his arrest or release?"

At the time of Jeremy Lum's death, a sheriff's spokesman said unsuccessful attempts to contact the family were made, and that proper booking and release procedures were followed.

The family isn't so sure, and wonders if better procedures for all inmates being released can't be put into place.

"The Lums have been in Lathrop since 1962, always in the community," said Connie Lum Perez, Jeremy's aunt. "There was a sense of betrayal. People we expected to help us most denied us help."

A pre-school teacher, Perez said it was a long time before she could bring herself to tell her students that law enforcement officers are the ones to call when they need help.

If there is a simmering bitterness among the family members, it doesn't show.

They've established Justice for Jeremy as a nonprofit organization with a goal of educating the public, and law enforcement, about mental health disorders, and to become the organization that officials call when a mental health episode results in the arrest of a sufferer.

"When we started our organization it was out of grief and a need to do something," Perez said. "It's always been our mission to help others. Let's not let this happen again."

Since the loss of her nephew, Perez has attended meetings of the San Joaquin County board of mental health, which oversees the various agencies that provide mental health services. In that time she's seen the board form a committee to study the criminal justice system, and has seen local lawmen attend day-long seminars on mental illness.

Also in the intervening years, Jerry Lum and Jeremy's mother, Dorothea Timmons, have filed a wrongful death lawsuit against those who allowed his son to die as he did.

"It was filed in federal court," Lum said. "We wanted to emphasize the civil rights complaint that a citizen in public suffering a mental disorder is not committing a crime.

"As much as a nuisance as he might be considered, it doesn't rise to the threshold of a crime. We wanted that brought to the awareness of local agencies, and it's the only avenue to get them to share internal information, records, video recordings. Anything about his arrest and incarceration is unavailable without a case. Unfortunately, that's the way it is. If we want to know what happened and how it happened, a lawsuit is a prerequisite for gathering information."

A search and rescue volunteer for 10 years, Jerry Lum hopes his family's organization will continue to be a source for people whose loved ones go missing. A Manteca family called the Lums when their mother, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, walked barefoot out of a hospital emergency room, and the family of one of the missing fishermen in Mexican waters called Lum, before Mexican and American officials extended their search, to see if he could organize a group to search the waters off Baja California.

Lum masks his personal pain with a dignity, grace and eloquence. To address Friday night's gathering, which included local singers Kylie Thomasson and Nancy Dacumos, Lum found inspiration in the words of American astronauts.

"We're all on the same planet ... and I'm hoping the making of war on others ... even those with physical or mental health issues will cease being such a popular, widespread activity," Lum said. "Just as a chain is

only as strong as its weakest link, a society is only as healthy as its most ill, and is only as just as its most unjust policies. Success should be judge by health and affluence of all its citizens. With these values in mind I'd like to see Justice for Jeremy go forth and succeed, to fight the good fight against ignorance, indifference, against prejudice and stigma toward persons suffering from mental illness. We need everyone who shares the vision to join in and advocate for those that cannot advocate for themselves."

The Lums' tragic loss of a family member is not an isolated incident.

Justiceforjeremy.org includes news articles relevant to the cause. Recently in Turlock, a woman called for help because her 34-year-old bipolar son was experiencing a dramatic episode. Law enforcement had helped in the past, and she hoped it would again. She told the 911 dispatcher that her son claimed to have a gun, although she didn't see it. California Highway Patrol officers responded and ultimately fired 55 bullets into the man.

Not only is it heartbreaking to think of a mother seeking help, only to have her son die at the hands those asked to assist, but every time the Lums encounter news of such an incident, it must seem like another dagger to their hearts, a reminder of their own heartbreaking experience.

Still, they soldier on, focused on preventing another family from suffering as they did.

The pain remains, but watching Jerry Lum on Friday is to know life does get better.

As he visited with those who gathered to lend their support and addressed the crowd, he held in his arms Jaelyn, his 11/2-year-old granddaughter, the daughter of his son, Ryan, and Nina Ortega. A beautiful child, she clearly has a special bond with her grandpa.

"It's been said more than a few times she brought joy back to the family just when we needed it most,"

Jerry Lum said.

Life goes on after a tragedy. People return to their lives, even those who grieve the most. Thankfully the Lums are determined to do more than that. They've moved forward committed to keeping Jeremy alive in their hearts, using his memory as a source of inspiration to prevent other loved ones from hurting as they have been hurt.

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