

# Lathrop family rallies after death of bipolar man

By James Burns  
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LATHROP -- Connie Lum-Perez shudders, her voice trembling as emotions bubble and burst at the surface.

"Here," she says, passing off the phone, unable to continue a conversation that cuts through her soul.

Two years later, the pain of her nephew's death is still very real, still very confusing to one of Lathrop's bedrock families.



DARRYL  
BUSH/dbush@modbee.com -  
Jeremy Lum's father and mother,  
Jerry Lum and Dorothea Timmons,  
hold their granddaughter, Jaelyn  
Lum, 1, all from Lathrop, as they  
and other family gather with signs  
at Lathrop Road near Woodfield  
Drive, in Lathrop, Calif., on  
Monday, August 8, 2011. Jeremy  
Lum died tragically in 2009, shortly  
after being held by police after a  
"manic" episode due his bipolar  
condition.

The mere mention of Jeremy Lum's name and the strange circumstances surrounding his final days rip through this woman's brave facade.

She collects herself long enough to sift through it all, highlighting the pillars of "Justice for Jeremy" — a mental health awareness campaign born from her grief.

Jeremy Lum was bipolar, a disease that affects roughly 5.7 million adults in the United States.

The nonprofit organization has threads that stretch across the state and will hold its third Memorial March and Mental Health Awareness Festival on Sept. 10 at Lathrop's Valverde Park.

"For me, personally, every time there's news of another incident or tragedy, it's like starting all over again," Lum-Perez said. "It takes me back to that time. For me, it's still hard. (But) it strengthens me even more in our mission."

Losing Jeremy wasn't easy. He was a popular teen at Sierra High, a torch-bearing student athlete and member of the Manteca campus's first graduating class. Like others in his family, Lum returned home after college, plying his bachelor's degree from the University of California at Berkeley in the town he was raised.

"My dad always taught us to give back to our community," Lum-Perez said. "We've been in business here in Lathrop since the 1960s. We've gone away to college and come back and served our community."

Jeremy Lum, 29, was prone to wild emotional swings, hallucinations and sleepless nights. A pill cocktail — anti-psychotics and sleep medication, among others — helped keep him balanced.

Most of the time.

## Tragic misunderstanding

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On the eve of his disappearance, July 8, 2009, Lum was taken into custody by Lathrop police. He became lost on foot on the way to his aunt's house and ended up at a stranger's doorstep instead — three blocks out of the way.

In the throes of a delusional episode, Lum, who lived alone, was convinced he had the right address, and the residents said he appeared confused when they tried to convince him otherwise.

Police, Lum-Perez says, were called out of concern for her nephew's well-being, not because he was a threat.

Hours later, after being detained for public intoxication, Lum was released from the San Joaquin County Jail barefoot and with no transportation.

"That's the last time anyone saw him alive," said his father, Jerry Lum.

After an exhaustive, three-day search by family and friends, a jet skier found Jeremy Lum's body floating in the San Joaquin River beneath the Howard Road bridge. He had drowned. The Sheriff's Department declined to comment, citing a pending lawsuit filed by the Lum family.

## Movement with many faces

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While it bears his name, "Justice for Jeremy" is a movement with many faces.

There is Mitrice Richardson, a 24-year-old honors graduate from California State University, Fullerton, who was bipolar. She was arrested in Malibu during a delusional episode in September 2009 and later released with no transportation, cell phone, ID or family notification.

The Lathrop teen is prone to manic spells, the same kind that led Jeremy on his twisted mid-night stroll near Woodfield Park.

Taylor was there recently, standing at Woodfield Drive and Lathrop Avenue, waving signs and cowbells with the Lums and a throng of supporters. On the eighth of every month, for 14 consecutive months after Jeremy's death, "Justice for Jeremy" gathered on that corner with a fervor and focus that never waned.

Nearly a year later, during a balmy August evening, it's clear little has changed. This group's cheer captain, Lum-Perez bounces back and forth along Lathrop Avenue, holding phone, sign and cowbell in her hands. Jerry Lum hangs out beneath a tree, shaking hands and fielding questions. Dorothea Timmons, Jeremy's mom, sports a T-shirt with her son's face emblazoned on the front.

At times, traffic slows to a crawl as the curious and intrigued honk and wave.

To the casual observer, it probably doesn't look like much — a small, fleeting gesture; a split-second hello and goodbye. But for the Lum family, and those like Taylor and her mother, Andrea Navarro, it represents hope.

Navarro insists that it is working. By simply being visible and loud, Navarro believes "Justice for Jeremy" has affected the social conscience in their community.

There is a compassion and level of unique training among Lathrop's first-responders, she says. The deputies in Lathrop "were kind and helped her (daughter) through her episodes and helped keep her safe. For people like myself, we need this kind of help."

The hope, Jerry Lum says, is that "Justice for Jeremy" will inspire change throughout the system, reaching beyond city and county lines.

He wants to create a national database for those with mental illnesses, one that can be easily accessed from, say, a squad car. He'd like to participate in city, county and statewide training, instructing others in the care and handling of the mentally ill.

For now, though, the Lums are content with feet on the street, rallying at this busy Lathrop intersection and meeting annually for the Memorial March and festival.

"The only positive option we have is to try and make sure things are different in the future," he said. "There are too many people with mental illnesses falling through the cracks."

## Memorial march

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To ensure that, the Lums are going the extra mile — or six. Next month, supporters will rally in the parking lot of the sheriff's station for the Memorial March, a run-walk free to the public. The Lums expect more than 70 participants, and several hundred more at the festival. "Symbolically, we're completing the walk that Jeremy couldn't finish," Lum-Perez said. The journey is long, roughly 6.5 miles, and it crawls out of rural French Camp toward Interstate 5 and into Lathrop, following a path lined with red ribbon. A small group of participants — mostly Lum's cousins — will make the trek barefoot, as Lum did that fateful morning.

It won't bring him back, or fill the void, but the march — like the vigils, mobile billboard and outreach services — help this family move forward. One step at a time.

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