

It was the text of their lives

A single insulting message set off a series of events that has devastated two families and a circle of friends in the Valley.

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It was the kind of text message many teenagers might send.

Mike Yepremyan, 19, wanted to see his girlfriend, but she was hanging out with another girl. So he sent her a pouty text with a nasty comment about her companion.

He hit send just after 5 p.m. on a Wednesday in November, triggering a series of events he could never have anticipated.

By 9 p.m., two families had been devastated and a circle of friends had been torn apart.

When Mike wasn't in class at Pierce College or working as a dispatcher for a private ambulance company, he could usually be found with his closest buddies. At Los Angeles Baptist, the private high school in the San Fernando Valley where they met, they were known as the Middle Eastern kids.

Mike Yepremyan and Ohan Barsamian were Armenian. Ali Hosseini was Persian. They were a little louder than their classmates, a little more outgoing. For Valentine's Day one year, Mike borrowed money from his father to buy a long-stemmed rose for each of the 150 young ladies in their high school.

When their parents set the table for one of the boys, they could expect to find all three waiting to be fed. Sleepovers were the norm. So when Mike showed up unannounced at Ohan's house after work Nov. 18, no one was surprised.

All that was out of the ordinary was Mike's mood.

He and his girlfriend, Denielle Wegrzyn, were fighting, a rarity. Mike worshiped her, always admiring her long blond hair. And she was learning Armenian for him. After two years of dating, she'd picked up numbers and common expressions.

As the three teenagers discussed how to spend their night, Mike grumbled about a nasty exchange of text messages he'd just had with Denielle.

Those messages and the events that unfolded that night are described in court records and in testimony from a preliminary hearing. Ohan, Denielle and others offered further details in interviews with The Times.

Mike had hoped to see Denielle as soon as he got off work that night. He was disappointed to

hear she was with Kat Vardanian. The two girls had met through mutual friends three months earlier. Mike didn't like Kat. He thought she dressed too provocatively, and he worried she might be a bad influence on his girlfriend, his friends said. Despite Mike's feelings, Denielle and Kat were growing closer.

They had met up with friends for dinner in Glendale earlier in the evening. To avoid rush-hour traffic, they decided to kill time at a tobacco lounge in Burbank, a delay Denielle explained to Mike via text message. The girls were parked at a gas station in Kat's pearl-white Infiniti when Mike's response lit up Denielle's iPhone, tucked in the cup holder:

"Every time u hang out with that bitch u guys get hookah. Is there something cool bout her n hookah that u enjoy so much?"

In interviews and in courtroom testimony, Denielle described what happened next:

Kat peered at the phone's screen.

"Oh, I'm a bitch, huh?" she snapped.

Denielle tried to calm her, but Kat grew irate. She grabbed Denielle's phone and scrolled down to Mike's number.

"My brother is gonna beat him up," she said, according to Denielle's testimony.

Kat picked up her own phone and dialed her sibling, Hovik Dzhuryan, switching to Armenian when he picked up. The words were incomprehensible to Denielle, until the end of the call.

"Oot mek oot," Kat said, according to Denielle. "818." Denielle knew how to count in Armenian. Kat was reciting Mike's phone number.

Alarmed, Denielle asked to be dropped off at her car, parked at Kat's house in Van Nuys. Once home, she sent Mike a text.

"This night is so sad n now I'm home alone."

Mike's response frightened her.

"If by 12 u don't hear from me ... call the cops to cats house," he wrote. "Just in case ... but I promise nothing will happen."

Ali and Ohan paid little attention to Mike's spat with his girlfriend. They left him at Ali's house in Granada Hills while they filled up at a nearby gas station. There, they got a call from Mike.

"I'm gonna get in a fight," he said. "Just come back and I'll explain."

The two rushed back. Mike looked pale. He said Kat's brother had called and said he wanted to fight, according to his friends.

The three piled into Mike's car and began driving around aimlessly. The headlights on his gray Nissan Altima led them down Balboa Boulevard in Granada Hills and Victory Boulevard in Van

Nuys. They talked about how to handle the mess Mike had created. The calls to Mike's phone continued, but the voice on the other end no longer belonged to Kat's brother. It was deeper and more confrontational.

"Don't you know who I am?" the caller barked. "You never heard of me?"

"No, who are you?" Mike responded.

The call was cut off.

Then the phone rang again.

"OK, what you say right now is gonna determine what happens to you," the voice said. "Do you have any proof about why she's a bitch?"

"I don't want to offend you," Mike replied.

"Do you have any proof?" the voice asked.

"Yeah, I do," Mike said hesitantly.

The line went silent again.

In the last in this string of calls, the voice demanded a meeting. "How about Glendale?" the caller asked. Mike insisted on the Valley, where the boys already were. He picked the Sears parking lot in North Hollywood. It was well-lighted, wide open.

Of the three friends, Mike was the only one with an imposing physique -- a broad chest and thick arms. None was the fighting type. Mike began calling friends. I need backup, he told them. Most had excuses, but three didn't. Two were guys Ali and Ohan had never met. Their sudden presence unnerved them.

Together, a reinforced crew of six, they waited in the Sears parking lot, lighted up like a baseball field.

The group was relieved. Half an hour had passed, and the other side had not shown. Then about 8:30 p.m., a black BMW with no front license plate pulled in.

Two young men stepped out. The driver, the shorter of the two, wore an orange hoodie. His hair was trimmed close, the same length as his beard. The passenger was taller and had a leather jacket wrapped around a wide frame.

They approached Mike and his friends.

The conversation started calmly, in Armenian.

The strangers grilled Mike. Why had he called Kat the name he did? Why had he disrespected her?

Mike tried to explain.

"When you translate it, it's a lot worse," he said. "I didn't mean it like that."

The exchange seemed to be coming to a peaceful conclusion when the taller stranger blew up, getting in Mike's face and shouting threats. Without warning, the other guy slugged Mike in the face.

Mike stumbled back, then gathered himself. He was ready to retaliate.

The taller stranger intercepted him with what appeared to be a sweeping punch aimed at the back of Mike's head. His fist was clenched inside his jacket sleeve. When he made contact, there was a boom and a shower of sparks, witnesses said.

Mike collapsed, killed by a gunshot wound to the head. White smoke lingered over his body. Authorities later found a single 9-millimeter shell casing beside a pool of blood on the asphalt.

The strangers fled in the BMW.

A nurse at Mission Community Hospital called Mike's parents at 2:30 in the morning. She wanted Art Yepremyan and Ani Atajyan to come to the hospital.

She wouldn't say why.

Ani called Mike's cellphone. Then she tried Ohan's. A police officer answered.

"You have to go to the hospital," he said.

"Is he OK?" Ani pleaded.

"You need to go to the hospital."

That's when they knew.

Mike was their only son. For 15 years, until the birth of their daughter, he was their only child. The three had left their native Armenia together. Art and Ani worked at small ethnic markets in the Valley for years, making less than minimum wage, eventually saving enough to take Mike out of public school, where they feared he'd get caught up with the wrong crowd.

The man who shot Mike has not been identified.

Authorities say the driver of the BMW was Vahagn Jurian, 22, of Van Nuys, described in courtroom testimony as Kat's cousin. Jurian is believed to have fled to Armenia, which does not have an extradition treaty with the U.S. The district attorney's office has charged him with being an accessory after the fact to the killing.

Kat, now 21, was arrested and charged with murder and conspiracy to commit assault. Prosecutors contended she had set the night's events in motion when she allegedly told her brother to beat up Mike. Prosecutors did not charge her brother, however, citing a lack of evidence.

At a preliminary hearing in Van Nuys last month, Kat sat handcuffed to a chair, sobbing as Ohan,

Ali and Denielle recounted what happened that night.

The courtroom was packed, the atmosphere tense. Friends and relatives of Mike filled one half of the room; Kat's family and friends crowded the other side.

A line of bailiffs stood between them.

Kat's lawyer, Anthony Brooklier, said that even if Kat did tell her brother to attack Mike, she never could have anticipated what would happen.

Jurian's father, Abraham, took the stand and was asked whether his son had called him in tears the day after the shooting and told him he'd gotten into a fight that had ended with someone's death. The father said he couldn't remember. After consulting with his lawyer, he acknowledged that his son had made such an admission.

At the close of the hearing, Superior Court Judge Karen Nudell dismissed the murder charge against Kat, but ordered her to stand trial on the conspiracy count.

When the judge dismissed the murder charge, Mike's mother wailed. A bailiff told her to be quiet or leave.

Brooklier and Kat's father said that Kat, her brother and other family members declined to be interviewed for this article.

Art Yepremyan is rarely without a cigarette these days. On a recent afternoon, he sat in the office of his flooring business, thumbing through old cards and photos. He pointed out a plaque Mike had given him, commemorating a star for which the teenager had paid to name after his father. Art says he steps out of his Granada Hills home some nights and looks up in the star's direction.