

WHAT MADE A SON SUDDENLY SNAP?

KILLER IN THE FAMILY

AN HONORS STUDENT RAISED IN WEALTH, **ASHTON SACHS** SHOWED NO SIGN OF VIOLENCE—UNTIL HE SHOT HIS PARENTS WHILE THEY SLEPT

By **CHRISTINE PELISEK** and **MICHELLE TAUBER**

One week after the fatal shooting of Brad and Andra Sachs last February, their 19-year-old son Ashton delivered a tearful eulogy. “He talked about how he loved his parents,” recalls Andra’s sister Lesley

Summers. “He said he’d had a dream that they weren’t dead, and they drove up and Andra said, ‘Bullets can’t kill us.’” Along with his older brother Myles, he also served as a pallbearer at the funeral of Andra, 54, and Brad, 57, who were shot in bed at their home in the affluent enclave of San Juan Capistrano, Calif. “He collapsed on me, crying,” says Andra’s childhood friend Ruth Briscoe. “It was pretty powerful.” The tears also flowed at the hospital, where for weeks Ashton kept a daily vigil at the bedside of his 8-year-old brother Landon, who had been paralyzed in the shooting rampage. “He would cry and say, ‘Landon is 8 years old and he doesn’t have a dad,’” recalls Ashton’s former girlfriend Sarah Verbeek. “He’d say, ‘I can’t believe somebody killed my parents.’”



Less than one month later, authorities had arrested their prime suspect in the slayings: Ashton. As the evidence mounted—including a semiautomatic



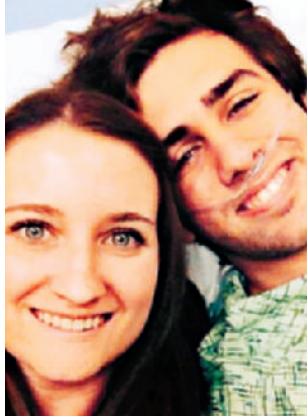
SCENE OF THE CRIME

Ashton shot his parents, Brad and Andra, in their bed at the family’s \$2.5 million luxury home in San Juan Capistrano, Calif.

rifle found in his Prius and phone records placing him in the area at the time of the murders—investigators pushed him to offer his side of the story, to “give a reason why,” according to grand jury testimony released in the case. Ashton, whom investigators described as polite, calm and “very positive” when the interrogation began, replied simply, “I don’t have a reason why. Just a lot of problems.”

It’s an answer that even those closest to Ashton still can’t comprehend. According to grand jury transcripts, the onetime honors student drove 18 hours on Feb. 8, 2014, from his condo in Seattle to the family’s San Juan Capistrano home, armed with a semiautomatic rifle and a shoebox of ammunition. He would later tell investigators that he paced outside his parents’ bedroom for 10 to 15 minutes, “thinking about what to do, whether to go through with it, go home, kill himself there.” He shot them in bed, he later said, because he blamed them for his “messed-up life,” saying that his parents didn’t trust him, he was “the least favorite child in the family,” and that made him feel “horrible.”

In exclusive interviews with a dozen people connected to Ashton and his parents, those who know him best tell PEOPLE they never saw any hint of the darkness that would lead to two charges of murder and two charges of attempted murder (against Landon and Ashton’s 17-year-old sister Alexis, who was not harmed). “He never showed signs of aggression or threatened to hurt someone,” says Verbeek, who dated him for one year after they met in a sign-language class. “He wasn’t that kid you



THE WOMAN HE LOVED

Former girlfriend Sarah Verbeek (with Ashton) calls him brilliant, funny and attentive. “We never fought.”

see on TV crime documentaries that secludes himself and doesn’t talk to anyone. He never spoke bad about his family. He never talked about guns. Nothing.”

Attorneys on both sides acknowledge that the crime is baffling and say money wasn’t a motive. With Ashton living on his own in Seattle at the time of the murders, “it wasn’t like a young guy trapped by age or a financial situation under the thumb of controlling parents,” says Orange County Deputy D.A. Michael Murray. Ashton’s public defender Seth Bank notes his client’s lack of a criminal

history and says, “You look at the outside of this case and you see a good-looking, nice kid, a soft kid with a huge, bright future, with family resources. It doesn’t fit anything that makes sense.”

And yet behind the wealthy facade of their San Juan Capistrano life, the Sachs family had a troubled history. Andra, a self-made real estate mogul with an estimated net worth of \$80 million, had met Brad, the son of a local surfing legend, at a computer trade show and married him in 1991. Ashrewd businesswoman, “she called herself Queen Andra,” recalls Summers, and was “a little bit ruthless,” says her other sister, Stephanie Garber. At the same time, “when it came to her children, she loved them,” says Summers. “Her heart was good when it came to her children.”

The couple acquired Flashcom, an Internet DSL service, in 1998, and the money began to pour in. One year later, tragedy struck: 18-month-old daughter Sabrina, the youngest of their four children, fell into the backyard hot tub and drowned. Devastated, Andra refused to talk about the death and never set foot in the house again. “After Sabrina died, it was swept under the rug. I know none of those kids got counseling,” Brad’s sister Lisa McGowan says of Myles, Ashton and Alexis. “It was the turning point in their lives.”

Sabrina’s death rocked the Sachses’ marriage, and in 2000 they filed for divorce, with Andra accusing Brad of assaulting her in front of the children and Brad alleging in court papers that she was mentally unbalanced. But soon

after, the couple reconciled. Andra, meanwhile, was “hell-bent on having another child,” says McGowan, and in 2007 they adopted Landon and his older sister Lana, then 9, from a Russian orphanage. “She was looking for that replacement child for Sabrina,” says McGowan.

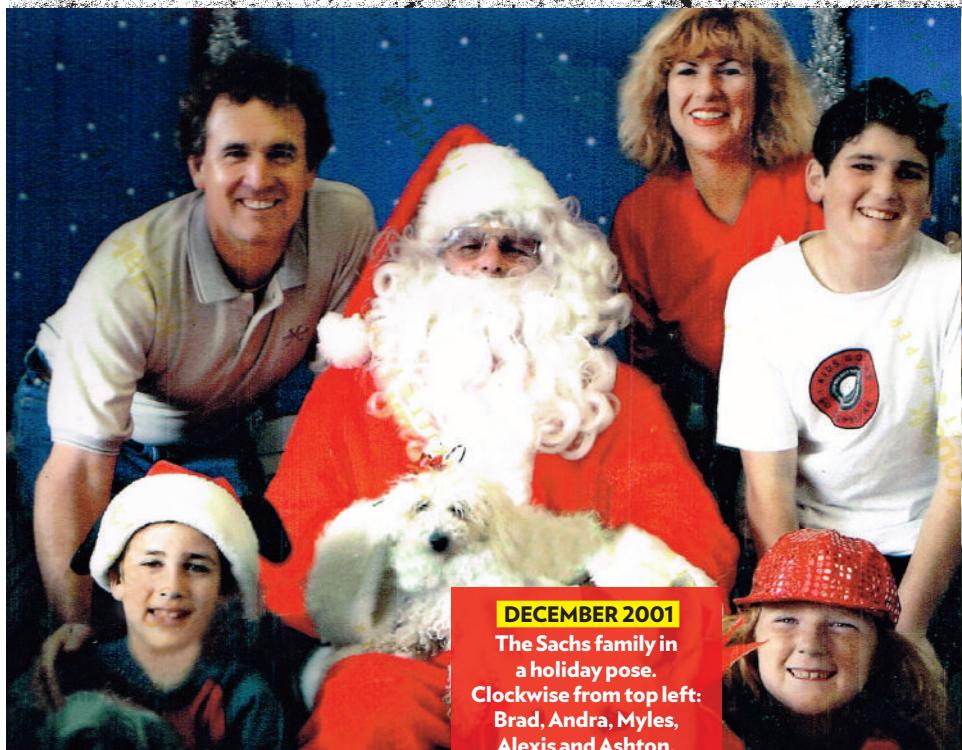
For his part, Ashton embraced his new siblings, sharing stories and photos of the trip he took to Russia with Andra. “He was so excited,” says Connor Ward, who met Ashton in sixth grade. Back then, “he was a hyper, goofy kid,” recalls Ward. “I think that people didn’t like his energy sometimes. To me he was a funny kid. There was never any dark humor at all.” A computer whiz with a passion for trading cards, he

“loved the film *Borat*,” says Blake Calabrese, another middle school friend. “He would burst out lines from it at the beginning of class.” He also had an irreverent streak: Though gum wasn’t allowed in school, “I remember that he brought in a backpack that had nothing but gum,” says Ward. “He filled it to the top with all these different types of gum and was handing it out. It was funny.”

Garber remembers her nephew as “a lovely, sweet boy” but says he sometimes clashed with his dad. “He didn’t get along with him when he was younger. He was a little hyper, and it would annoy Brad.” She says that during the Sachses’ split, “Ashton was definitely on his mother’s side,” but that

‘I think of my friend I loved, and I can’t see the kid who murdered his parents’

—CONNOR WARD



DECEMBER 2001
The Sachs family in a holiday pose. Clockwise from top left: Brad, Andra, Myles, Alexis and Ashton.



2009
“Andra was controlling and overbearing,” says her sister Lesley (right, with Ashton and Andra).



FEB. 22, 2014
In a photo taken a week after his parents’ funeral, Ashton posed with cousins Kelsey and Erin and grandfather Hal (Brad’s father) in Point Loma, Calif.

A PATH TO MURDER:

ASHTON’S LIFE OF PRIVILEGE & PAIN

APRIL 20, 1994
Ashton is born, the second son of Brad and Andra Sachs. “Ashton was always a little precocious,” says his aunt Stephanie Garber. “He is a sweet boy.”

APRIL 28, 1999
Ashton’s 18-month-old sister Sabrina drowns in the family hot tub. “Everything went south when she died,” says Brad’s sister Lisa McGowan.

MARCH 2000
Brad and Andra battle through a bitter divorce. They later reconcile but never remarry.

2007
The couple adopt Landon and Lana, then ages 2 and 9, from a Russian orphanage.

SUMMER 2013
Despondent after a breakup with girlfriend Sarah Verbeek, Ashton attempts suicide by overdosing on painkillers.

FALL 2013
Ashton moves to Seattle and enrolls in college, studying computer science. “He had a plan,” says Garber. “He had a future.”

FEB. 9, 2014
Brad and Andra Sachs are killed in their bed. Eight-year-old Landon is also shot, leaving the boy paralyzed.

LATE FEBRUARY 2014
Myles and Ashton apply for guardianship of their younger siblings.

MARCH 6, 2014
Police arrest Ashton when phone records suggest he lied about his whereabouts on the night of the murder. They also find a rifle in the trunk of his car.

after Brad was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2012, his relationship with Ashton improved. "He felt sorry for his father," says Garber. She also describes Ashton as "a ladies' man" and says she never saw him act out but recalls an incident "quite a long time ago when a kid was bullying him and he took a butter knife from the house and flashed it in front of the kid," she says. "The kid never bothered him after that."

An A student who taught residents at his grandmother's nursing home how to use computers, Ashton "was not superpopular but didn't seem weird or anything," says Donovan Tetsuka, a friend from Laguna Beach High School. Characterized by many of his friends as "goofy," his humor "could be described as five years younger," says Tetsuka. "He liked to joke around and seemed happy all the time." Yes, he could be a "lone wolf," but "he wasn't socially inept. To be popular you had to be a surfer, and he wasn't into that. It was a difference of interest." Another high school classmate, Jeremy Wentz, says Ashton was low-key about his family's wealth. "I had no idea he was that rich,"

says Wentz, who spent time playing World of Warcraft with him online. "He was pretty casual."

After Ashton started dating Verbeek, now 26, "he treated me like a princess and spoiled me rotten," she recalls. "We would take Landon to Chuck E. Cheese's and [Alexis and Lana] to the mall. If you didn't know Landon was his brother, you would think he was his son. He carried him everywhere. Andra and Brad would take us out on a boat. It was amazing"

Although the family had amassed a vast fortune, "Andra did not lavish her kids with money, and she didn't want them to be spoiled," says Garber. Still, "they always got to go to Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm. They had a nice lifestyle."



But there were simmering tensions at home. Ashton "fibbed a lot," says Summers, and Andra "didn't trust him with

a dime, and Ashton knew it. He stole money from her before, and she was monitoring what he was spending." Verbeek says Ashton "had a lot of pressure on him. Andra was always harping on him: 'You need to work more.' She didn't have a problem scolding him in front of me." Among his siblings, Verbeek adds, "definitely he had the most pressure to do good." McGowan says that Andra overtly favored Myles. "He was her favorite," she says. "Myles was her shadow." When it came to money, though, "Andra left equal amounts [to each of her kids]," says Garber, "and Ashton knew that."

Things took a grim turn in the summer of 2013, when Ashton's breakup with Verbeek sent him into a downward spiral, and he attempted suicide by overdosing on painkillers. That fall he left home for Seattle to attend the North Seattle Community College—a move Bank says was Andra's decision and came at a time when Ashton was fragile: "It didn't seem necessary to move him so quickly without plans for aftercare." Garber says Andra thought it was best for her brokenhearted son to move away from his ex. After the suicide attempt, "Andra was blaming everything on me," says Verbeek, who turned down Ashton's request that she move to Seattle with him behind his mother's back. Mostly, though, says Briscoe, Andra didn't understand the severity of Ashton's depression. "She told him to throw dirt on it and brush it off," Briscoe recalls. "She thought he was okay now."

In fact, things seemed to be stabilizing when Briscoe had lunch with Andra and Ashton in January 2014, one month before the murders. "She was praising Ashton, saying how proud she was: 'That's my boy,'" recalls Briscoe. "I work for a law school, and he was asking questions about it, saying law school was something

Ashton is a sweet kid. He had so much promise. I never thought he could do something like this'

—STEPHANIE GARBER



CLOSING IN
Law-enforcement officers searched for evidence near the Sachses' home on Feb. 9, 2014. Inset: Ashton's March 7, 2014, booking photo following his arrest for murder.



HIS LIFE BEHIND BARS

Above: Ashton appears with his attorney at a Dec. 12, 2014, arraignment hearing in Santa Ana, Calif. **Inset:** Andra's sister Lesley (center) and friend Cathy O'Neil leave the jail complex after the hearing. "For some reason he thinks he is getting out of it," Lesley says of her jail chats with Ashton. "He wants to finish college, so we're looking at correspondence college. He asks for books." Has she forgiven him? "I haven't."



he wanted to do later on. He was in great spirits. That's why it's so hard to understand what he did 33 days later."



Ashton would later tell deputies that he had "f----- up his life" and that he "had stopped going to school, where he had smoked marijuana [and] played video games during the days." Three days before the shooting, text messages recovered from Ashton's phone included an exchange between Ashton and Andra about Brad's birthday on Feb. 6. "You forgot his birthday. Not nice," Andra wrote. "I forgot his birthday just as much as he forgot he has a son," Ashton replied. "Wow, no he didn't. He loves you very much," his mother said.

According to grand jury testimony, Ashton told investigators he devised a plot to kill his parents four or five days before the rampage. His Internet search history showed Wikipedia articles on felony murder, the insanity defense and parole, an investigator tes-

tified. He killed his parents first, telling deputies that he "wanted them to die for everything that he felt." He then shot Landon in his bedroom before shooting once at Alexis after slamming open her bedroom door. She told authorities the noise woke her but she didn't see her attacker, and that after she saw her parents and Landon, she woke Lana, who called 911.



In the weeks after the attack, Ashton spent much of his time at Landon's bedside. Just eight hours after the shooting, "I saw him at the hospital and he said they were still looking for whoever it was," recalls Wentz, who works at the same hospital where Landon was admitted. "He was very mellow about it, honestly. He said, 'I am just happy my brother is okay.' I gave him a hug and told him to let me know if he needed anything." Garber also saw Ashton at the hospital, where he said he was planning to move back to California and help raise his younger siblings. "He said

he rented a house with Myles and they were all going to live there," she recalls.

Before long, however, authorities homed in on Ashton, and, according to grand jury documents, he confessed to the shootings after being told police had found a weapon inside his car. He has pleaded not guilty and is expected to stand trial later this year. Prosecutors haven't decided if they will seek the death penalty—a punishment Andra, a longtime Democratic donor, said she "never supported," says Bank. Currently held in a solitary cell at the Central Men's Jail in Orange County, "he is very isolated," Bank adds. "It is really hard for him." Says Summers, who has visited him there: "He says he feels bad. He wants to finish college." He repeatedly brings up something else too. "He says he misses his family," says Garber. "I just don't get it." ●