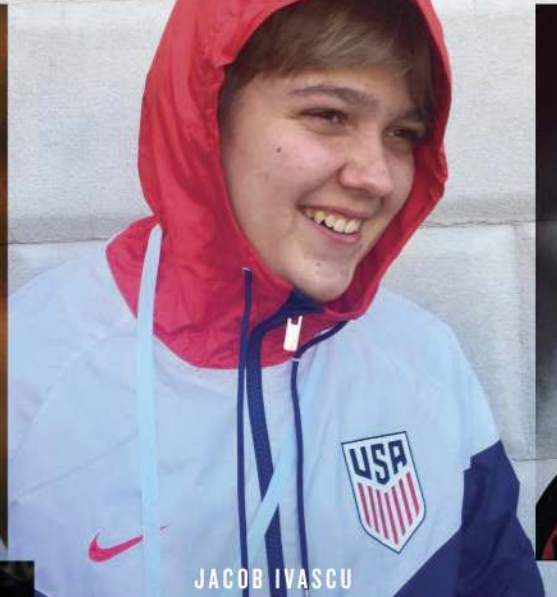




DANIEL HAWKINS



JACOB IVASCU



DRAKE RUIZ

THE WRECKAGE

Joshua Ivascu, who survived the Jan. 19 crash (below) that killed his brother, says it “felt like a train ran over us.”

Sleepover Tragedy

A TEEN PRANK TURNS DEADLY

A game of Ding-Dong Ditch leaves 3 best friends dead, a neighbor charged with murder, and 6 grieving parents in search of justice

By **SANDRA SOBIERAJ WESTFALL**
and **CHRISTINE PELISEK**



WATCHAWA, IHOHICINDA/THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/AP; INSETS, FROM LEFT: COURTESY HAWKINS FAMILY; COURTESY IVASCU FAMILY; COURTESY RUIZ FAMILY

The three California boys, inseparable since fifth grade, were squeezing out one last bit of fun from a January weekend already packed with a birthday dinner, wrestling, a sleepover and one freezing plunge into a backyard pool. The trio—Daniel Hawkins, Jacob Ivascu and Drake Ruiz, all 16—were half of a six-pack who did everything together. And so on Jan. 19, the Sunday night before the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Daniel and Jacob each had a younger brother along when the sixth of their happy crew, 18-year-old Sergio Campusano, got behind the wheel of his mom’s old Prius and the rest piled in. They were headed on a snack run to a nearby gas station minimart in Corona, Calif., and along the way were playing the age-old game of Ding-Dong Ditch, with a YouTube twist. It was up to Joshua Ivascu, Jacob’s 14-year-old brother, to ring a stranger’s doorbell, moon whoever answers and run away. The boys thought they were being smart—safe, even—by choosing an adobe house on Mojeska Summit Road. “We saw in a window the glow of these LED lights that a lot of kids have in their room,” Sergio recalls. “So we were like, ‘Look! They have kids. They’re going to be chill.’” The plan was to get all the hilarity on video for Drake’s YouTube channel. “Drake made videos each month, editing together clips of all the stuff we did and putting it to music,” says Sergio. “He always said that one day, when we’re older, we could look back on all the good times we had.”

But what unspooled on Jan. 19 was sheer horror—and it is forever memorialized not on YouTube but on three gravestones. Sergio told police that Joshua Ivascu rang the bell on Mojeska Summit Road, just around the corner from the Hawkins house, but fled



Tight Bonds

On the playground (top left) or at a school dance (left, in November 2019), Daniel, Jacob and Drake—with Sergio and their younger brothers—“found a way to make it fun, no matter where they were,” says Ramona Ivascu. Top right, from left: Joshua and Jacob Ivascu, Daniel Hawkins, and Drake and Caleb Ruiz in 2018. Right, from left, Sergio, Daniel and Drake in January 2020.



‘THERE WAS THIS REAL BROTHERLY LOVE THAT THEY HAD FOR EACH OTHER’
—MOM JANET HAWKINS



to his friend’s Prius when he heard someone—a man police identified as Anurag Chandra, 42—turn the door’s lock. While the boys continued on their snack run, Chandra allegedly chased them down in his Infiniti, ultimately ramming Sergio’s Prius at high speed into a tree with such force that the small four-door ricocheted into a utility pole. Daniel, Jacob and Drake were killed. Sergio, Joshua Ivascu and Daniel’s brother Joshua Hawkins were hospitalized for injuries ranging from a concussion to fractured vertebrae and ribs. Chandra, who a witness says circled back to the wreckage as he returned home, is charged with three counts of murder and three counts of attempted murder. Facing life in prison if convicted, the salesman pleaded not guilty on Feb. 21. (Chandra’s attorney declined to comment for this story.) “They were all very good kids, and it was a harmless prank,” says California Highway patrol officer Steven Cuevas, incredulous even three months later at how Chandra, who was already facing a spousal-

battery charge from a September 2019 incident involving his wife, could have forced the boys’ car into a tree and driven off. “He was a ticking time bomb with a seriously callous disregard for human life,” says Cuevas. “That’s what makes this different from vehicular manslaughter.”

The boys’ families held a funeral service for the trio at Corona’s Northpoint Evangelical Free Church, where the friends attended youth group every Tuesday and worshipped together the day they died. Today, Jacob and Daniel are buried beside each other at Olivewood Memorial Park in Riverside, where the Ivascu family lives after moving from Corona last year. Drake has a plot just about 20 feet away, “as close as we could get,” says his mother, Debbie Ruiz. Says Janet Hawkins: “We weren’t going to separate the boys, even in the ground.”

When Daniel, Drake and Jacob met as fifth graders at Corona’s Olive Branch Christian Academy in 2014, “it was an instant bond—not just a friend-

ship, but they all three believed in God, had the same ideas and were just inseparable,” says Jacob’s mother, Ramona Ivascu, 42. Even more, says Janet, 57, “they looked out for one another as brothers. I’d often hear them on the phone and they’d say goodbye with a ‘Hey, love you, bro.’” Sergio was folded into the pack after meeting Drake at church. As for the two Joshuas, both eighth graders, “it was never a drag to have them with us,” says Sergio. “They were always just a part of us.”

All three grieving families, leaning on their faith, are sharing their sons’ stories to spread a warning to other kids about consequences. “We all grew up playing Ding-Dong Ditch,” says Drake’s mom, Debbie Ruiz, 56, who runs an ambulance company. “Nobody would’ve ever thought of killing a kid over that. There’s so much road rage right now and too many crazy people.” Adds Ramona: “Even if everyone’s doing it, little actions can have big consequence.”

Each of the parents who lost a child to Chandra allegedly “using his car as a battering ram,” as Daniel’s father, Craig Hawkins, 61, put it, also bears a message of forgiveness. “I have to forgive, otherwise I’m only punishing myself with bitterness and anger,” says Debbie. “It’s what we believe,” says her ex-husband Billy, 54, a truck driver who lives in Tennessee but regularly saw their son Drake. Their forgiveness, though, doesn’t override their interest in justice. In their view, Chandra “is a menace to society and not taking ownership of



MOURNING DANIEL HAWKINS
Craig and Janet (front) with their children Joshua, 13, and Sarah, 18. “We have our grieving moments, but we need to invest in and raise to be good people,” says Janet.

what he did,” says Craig. Adds Billy: “I would love to see [Chandra] not see sunlight.”

More than anything, the families want to honor their sons’ lives, setting up a website called Rememberthe3.com. “I don’t want them to become a statistic—like, ‘Oh, three teenage boys killed,’” says Craig. His Daniel, nicknamed Hawk by his football teammates and a nationally ranked kicker on track for a college scholarship, was tough to discipline the few times he stepped out of line. “I’d have to keep from laughing because the kid was so likable,” says Craig, a law professor with a call-in radio show that airs from Los Angeles. On Jan. 19 he headed to do the show just as his sons and their friends were on the front lawn, getting started on their sleepover party with a toss of the football. “I said to Daniel, ‘Hey man, have a good time, but be cool,’” Craig recalls. “That’s my last time seeing my son. There’s still the shock. I still expect him to come out of his bedroom and raid the refrigerator.”

Craig has gone over in his head all the *what-ifs* of the terrifying five minutes of road rage, asking his son Joshua—who was in the back seat and suffered fractures to his pelvis, ribs and tailbone plus contusions on his lungs—why they didn’t just pull over to the curb. “There were six of them, and my two sons were black belts. And Joshua goes, ‘Dad, we didn’t know if he had a gun.’”

Jacob, the Ivascus’ firstborn, was “like a second father” to his four siblings, says Ramona. “At dinner he would take the baby so my husband and I could finish eating. He was an old soul, a bookworm who



Police were quickly on the scene after a witness called 911. Inset: Chandra’s mug shot.



Mapping Out Murder Charges

Thanks to an eyewitness at the crash site who says they saw Anurag Chandra’s vehicle with major front-end damage drive by the scene and then followed the leaking-fluid trail, “we were surrounding his house pretty quickly,” says CHP’s Cuevas of defendant Chandra. “He turned out his lights and refused to come out for hours to turn himself in to authorities.” The high-speed impact of Chandra’s car hitting the teens’ car was “malicious and intentional,” says a law enforcement source, leading prosecutors to bring charges of murder instead of vehicular manslaughter.

COURTESY HAWKINS, IVASCU & RUIZ FAMILIES/9



**MOURNING
JACOB
IVASCU**

Ramona and Alex, an IT business owner (above), with Jedidiah, 2, and (back row from left) Jeremiah, 12; Jillian, 10; and Joshua, 14. Jacob had taught them “to think of others,” says Ramona.



**MOURNING
DRAKE
RUIZ**

Caleb (right, with Sergio) “can’t get Drake out of his mind,” says his father, Billy (not pictured). Below: Debbie with a teddy bear wearing her son’s elementary school jersey.

Sergio was living with the family of three (including Drake’s brother Caleb, 11) and was sharing Drake’s bedroom. “So they’re like brothers, too,” says Debbie. She notes Jan. 18 as the first time she didn’t drive Drake to the Ivascu home and hang out with the family too. “He said, ‘I just want to be with my friends, Mom.’ He was growing up.” To Sergio, Drake was the jokester who talked the whole group into shaving their heads last summer, only to dodge the clippers himself. “Because he knew it was a bad idea,” Sergio recalls with a chuckle. Once the pandemic travel restrictions are lifted, he says, he will visit his friends’

graves at least once a month: “Just to have them close to me, you know?”

While the families work out the details of scholarships and maybe a foundation in their sons’ names, they take comfort in knowing the boys’ faith prepared them. In church their last Sunday morning, the sermon was about how fragile life can be—“so that if you have one more day to live, or 10 days or 15 years, you are ready, because you’ve set your house in order for the Lord,” recalls Ramona. “Two times Jacob and I locked eyes, and I knew this was sinking into his heart. God was preparing him and the other boys. Little did they know what was heading their way.” For all the grief that remains, says Janet, “there’s a peace knowing that they lived life here together on earth, and they’re now living their life in heaven together.” ●

loved history. And all his friends say he was the glue that drew people together.” The group’s first sleepover of that January weekend was at her house on Friday night. She remembers watching through the window the next morning after breakfast as the boys “took off their clothes and jumped in the 50-degree swimming pool, videotaping the whole thing. I’m thinking, ‘Wow, these boys have so much life. They just know how to have fun.’”

Not 36 hours later her phone rang at 10:30 p.m. with word of the wreck, and she raced to Joshua at the hospital. Wearing his seat belt in the front seat, he’d suffered a “huge gash” behind his ear. “He told me he climbed out of the car but couldn’t open the door to let his friends and brother out. He said he could see them in the back seat, and it looked like Jacob had passed out. Thank God it was dark; he already saw more than he should.”

What she wants now is for Chandra to confess. “My Joshua kept saying, ‘Mom, I thought it was a safe neighborhood, we were just having fun,’” says Ramona. “They were not robbing a liquor store, these kids. I wish [Chandra] would just say, ‘I’m sorry.’”



Drake was a “natural” at rugby with plans to be a firefighter, says his mom, Debbie. In the last year

