



The voice of Siouxland. Print, online and mobile.

Sioux City Journal

Founded in 1864



CLOUDS & SUN 29 • 12 FORECAST, A2 | FRIDAY, JANUARY 6, 2023 | siouxcityjournal.com

SPECIAL JOURNAL REPORT

ABOUT THIS SERIES: Nearly a year ago, on Jan. 12, 2022, what appeared to be an ordinary call to police about a possible burglary in progress ended with shots fired. Michael Meredith had rushed a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy, who fired two shots from his service weapon — one of them killing Meredith — after Meredith struck him with a tire iron. In his obituary, his family listed his cause of death as a suicide after suffering many years with alcoholism, raising a number of questions. Chief among them: Was Meredith a criminal who got what he deserved, a conclusion many readers posted in the comments under media stories about the shooting? Or was there another explanation why a man with no previous brush with the law would attack law enforcement officers unprovoked? Months of Journal reporting, which includes interviews with Meredith's family members and reviews of police body camera videos from two officers who had interactions with Meredith in the hours before his death, found Michael had been dealing with alcoholism and mental illness for years. Those two factors played a major role in what eventually happened the night of his death. Today, The Journal offers the first of a three-day series looking into Michael's life, the events leading up to his death and a family's unsuccessful efforts to seek help through the various legal and medical channels designed to try to prevent such tragedies from happening.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES



JESSE BROTHERS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Michael Meredith's grave sits at the top of a hill in St. John's Cemetery near Jackson, Nebraska. Meredith died Jan. 12 after being shot in an altercation with a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy in Sergeant Bluff. His mother and other family members believe Michael's death was a suicide, saying he attacked the deputy so he would be shot and killed.

'I'll do something so the police will shoot me'

NICK HYTREK
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SERGEANT BLUFF — Roughly an hour before Michael Meredith was fatally shot by a sheriff's deputy, he told his mother he saw green caterpillars crawling on the ceiling in his home.

Going on five days without sleep, Michael's longtime anxiety was reaching levels his mother, Carol Meredith, had never seen.

The hallucinations began early in the morning that day, Jan. 12, when Michael called police to report a home intrusion by people he was seeing only in his mind. Hours later, he was shielding his eyes, believing he could kill people by looking at them. Yet through it all, he retained an



PROVIDED PHOTO

From left: Nikki Young, Michael Meredith, Chris Meredith and Shelby Meredith are shown at Chris Meredith's wedding. Michael Meredith dealt with anxiety and alcoholism for several years before his Jan. 12 death.

air of calm that frustrated Carol's attempts to convince him to get help.

Earlier that day, after hours of strange behavior, he told his mother he'd die before letting her take him to a hospital for a mental health assessment.

"He told me if I tried to commit him, he would commit suicide by police," Carol said, repeating the phrase she'd never heard before that conversation. "I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'I'll do something so the police will shoot me.'"

At 5:50 p.m., after officers responded to a report of a possible burglary in a Sergeant Bluff mobile home park, he was lying on the ground, dying from a gunshot fired by a Woodbury County Sheriff's deputy forced to take protective action after Michael rushed him and struck him with a tire iron.

Please see **MEREDITH**, Page A4

Biden toughens border, offers legal path for 30,000 a month

COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER AND ELLIOT SPAGAT
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Thursday the United States would immediately begin turning away Cubans, Haitians and Nicaraguans who cross the border from Mexico illegally — his boldest move yet to confront the migrant arrivals that have soared since he took office two years ago.

The new rules expand on an existing effort to stop Venezuelans attempting to enter the U.S., which began in October and led to a dramatic drop in Venezuelans coming to the southern border. Together, they represent a major change to immigration rules that will stand even if the Supreme Court ends a Trump-era public health law that allows U.S. authorities to turn away asy-

lum-seekers.

Homeland Security officials said they would begin denying asylum to those who circumvent legal pathways and do not first ask for asylum in the country they traveled through en route to the U.S.

Instead, the U.S. will accept 30,000 people per month from the four nations for two years and offer the ability to work le-

gally, as long as they come legally, have eligible sponsors and pass vetting and background checks. Border crossings by migrants from those four nations have risen most sharply, with no easy way to quickly return them to their home countries.

"Do not, do not just show up at the border," Biden said as he announced the changes, even as he acknowledged the hardships that

lead many families to make the dangerous journey north. "Stay where you are and apply legally from there," he advised.

"This new process is orderly," Biden said. "It's safe and humane, and it works."

Separately, Mexican security forces captured Ovidio Guzmán, an alleged drug trafficker wanted

Please see **BORDER**, Page A5

THE MINI: Help Wanted: Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. No political experience necessary.

—Journal Editorial Board

SPORTS	B1	BUSINESS	D6
OBITUARIES	C3	OPINION	A7
WEATHER	A3	SCOREBOARD	B4



“Getting help was hard for him. I definitely wanted him to, but it became a sore subject. He didn’t want anyone to know.

It was something I didn’t feel comfortable telling his family about against his wishes.”

Lauren Lanning, Michael’s fiancée



JESSE BROTHERS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Michael Meredith’s mother, Carol, and uncle, David Gill, discuss Michael’s alcoholism and mental health condition in the days leading up to his death. Michael Meredith was fatally shot on Jan. 12 after he struck a Woodbury County Sheriff’s deputy with a tire iron in a Sergeant Bluff mobile home park.

Meredith

From A1

It was a tragic conclusion to a day in which Michael’s family, unable to convince him to seek medical treatment on his own, made futile efforts to have police officers, his doctor and the court system force him to get help.

Trying to get him help

“The steps I took that day...I failed at every step,” Carol said. “You think you’re following the rules to stop a tragedy. Everything we were told we should do didn’t work.”

Why those steps didn’t turn out the way they’re supposed to remains a puzzle for which the family has no solution.

They place no blame on the deputy who shot Michael, ending his life at age 35.

And they hope the circumstances surrounding his death might raise awareness about mental health and lead to changes so other families don’t have to deal with the loss they feel every day.

Michael Meredith was always anxious, and had been for years. Carol forced him to get his driver’s license at age 18, though he hated to drive. He still did, disliking encounters with traffic on the streets.

“It seemed like over the years, he got more anxious as time went by,” Carol said.

He preferred the solitude of playing online video games at home after work. He didn’t do social media — no Twitter, Facebook or other similar platforms.

But he enjoyed technology. As kids, he and older brother Chris would order parts and build their own computers.

It was no surprise he eventually chose a computer-related career. After moving back to Sioux City from Minnesota in 2008, he did odd jobs and worked for Chris, a local contractor/developer. Michael enjoyed the construction field, and he paired that interest with his technology savvy to obtain an associate degree in computer drafting from Northeast Community College in South Sioux City. It led to a job at Gleeson Constructors, where he taught himself how to do 3D drafting and bring life to building plans.

“He could do a rendering and then walk them through it before it was built,” Chris said.

Anxiety builds

Though he had a good job and a long-term relationship with Lauren Lanning, his fiancée he’d been seeing for around 10 years, his anxieties did not ease. At the time of his death, he was taking a prescription medication for anxiety as well as two antidepressants, all drugs found in his system in a

postmortem toxicology report.

In spite of his medication, his anxiety seemed to be intensifying, Lanning said. It was becoming increasingly harder for him to interact with strangers, even family and people he was familiar with. Though he could be outwardly entertaining and funny while having a conversation, Michael’s anxiety simmered unseen during those social interactions.

“It was something that affected him acutely,” Lanning said. “It was hard for him to go out and socialize.”

Instead of going out, Michael spent most of his free time at Lanning’s Sioux City home or in the Sergeant Bluff house he rented from his brother, playing online video games with a small group of friends on a gaming setup that included the latest components. To avoid interactions, Lanning said she and Michael usually ordered takeout and streamed movies at home instead of going to a restaurant or movie theater. Over time, she said, he became more withdrawn, even becoming reluctant to go to family gatherings.

Michael would nonetheless show up to family cookouts. An outspoken liberal and a Bernie Sanders supporter, he’d get into political arguments with his brother-in-law, showing a breadth of knowledge gained from extensive reading that kept him up to date on current events and politics.

“You could say anything, and he could talk to you about it,” Chris said. “He could explain every concept you asked him.”

And he was generous, spoiling his nieces and nephews with extravagant gifts, including top-of-the-line virtual reality headsets so they could play online video games with him.

“He never spent money on himself,” his brother said.

That wasn’t quite true, given his love of video game systems and components ... and alcohol.

Carol first became aware of her son’s drinking problem about five months before his death. Michael would have a few drinks at family gatherings, but his mother had no idea of his drinking habits while in the privacy of his own home.

She remembers that night in August 2021 well. It was a Saturday, and Chris had received a call from a concerned friend who had been playing video games online with Michael. The friend said Michael’s speech was slurred all night, and when he no longer responded to their banter during a game, the friend believed Michael had passed out.

Chris alerted their mother, and Carol went to Michael’s house, but he wasn’t there. Instead, he was at Lauren’s home, intoxicated.

“I had never known him to be

like that,” Carol said.

Lanning had, however.

Michael had been drinking for years, she said, starting with a few beers after work and progressing into hard liquor for the past four or five years as he felt increasing pressures from his job and being around people.

“Alcohol was his release,” Lanning said. “It was a way to numb all the constant emotions he felt.”

A wedge develops

Michael’s alcohol intake increased over time, and Lanning moved out of his home four or five years ago because of it. Lanning said she asked him several times to go into treatment, but he refused because dealing with doctors and treatment providers could be daunting for him. Instead, he kept it a secret, telling Lanning not to inform his family about his drinking.

“Getting help was hard for him,” she said. “I definitely wanted him to, but it became a sore subject. He didn’t want anyone to know. It was something I didn’t feel comfortable telling his family about against his wishes.”

Carol finally found out that August night, an encounter Lanning said she doesn’t remember.

Carol took Michael home with her. He stayed a couple days, during which time he drank all the liquor in her home.

Realizing her son had a problem, Carol confronted him one night, telling him he needed help.

“He wasn’t very agreeable,” she said.

Carol went to bed and later heard a crash. Michael appeared to have had a seizure and had fallen down. She called her brother Pat Gill, who lives nearby, and they took Michael to the emergency room, where doctors told him he needed to get alcohol abuse treatment.

“They asked him if he was going to hurt himself,” Carol said. “He said no.”

Reaching out for help

In the ER, Michael told his mother that for weeks he’d been binge drinking, starting after work on Fridays and going until Sunday morning, when he’d begin sobering up for work on Monday. He agreed to get help and was accepted into an inpatient program at Rosecrance Jackson Centers in Sioux City. After 20 days in treatment, he signed himself out.

“He said he was done drinking,” Carol said. “He just said he could do it himself and didn’t need them to help him.”

He stayed sober for a few weeks, but it didn’t last. Instead, a cycle of what Carol believed was a brief period of sobriety followed by a weekend drinking binge developed. Each time, Michael would call Carol, who would bring him to her home to sober up.

“I think he just felt more safe

with me because I’m a nurse,” Carol said.

But Michael wasn’t being completely honest with his mother about his drinking habits, Lanning said. There were no cycles of sobriety and bingeing. He continued to drink nearly every night until the final days before his death. Though Lanning worked nights and slept during daytime hours and wasn’t able to see him as often, she observed how Michael’s drinking began to affect his personality and his mental well-being.

“He definitely was going through a period where it was harder for him to go out and interact with people,” she said. “Even going to the liquor store was difficult.”

On Friday evening, Jan. 7, Carol received a familiar call from Michael. He told her he’d been drinking. She picked him up and brought him home. It was the last time he drank, to Carol’s knowledge.

“After that Saturday, he seemed all right,” she said. “He was completely acting normal. He just told me he couldn’t sleep.”

Changes take place

By Monday, Michael’s anxiety had intensified. He hadn’t been able to sleep all weekend. After arriving at work, he began sweating and feeling anxious and was sent home. He called his mother later, telling her he’d made an appointment with his doctor to talk about his anxiety. He also said he’d received a referral to see a counselor and had scheduled an appointment for Jan. 18, a meeting he wouldn’t live long enough to make.

By Tuesday, he’d gone five days without drinking or sleeping and still wasn’t feeling better. Nothing seemed wrong, Carol said, when she talked to him that day.

“Everything was normal, except he couldn’t sleep, and he told me he was messed up,” Carol said. “He said, ‘I think I keep hearing voices! I kind of blew it off. He was acting normal.’”

Within hours, Michael was no longer behaving normally.

Her ringing phone woke Carol up at about 3:30 the morning of Wednesday, Jan. 12. She didn’t recognize the number, but answered anyway.

It was Michael, calling from a Sergeant Bluff police officer’s phone while sitting in the back of a squad car.

“Everything is so messed up over here, and they just tore up my house,” Michael told her.

Confused by those comments, Carol got dressed and drove to Michael’s house.

About half an hour earlier, at 2:55 a.m., Officer Travis Hutzell was dispatched to Michael’s home

at 201 Fifth St. after Michael had called to report an intruder.

In a recording of the 911 call, Michael can be heard telling the dispatcher, “Some crazy ex-boyfriend came over here and he put like a false beating over her so now I got ...” before the call disconnected. The dispatcher called back. Michael did not answer.

Footage from Hutzell’s body camera showed him walking up to Michael’s house. Michael talked to Hutzell through an open window near the front door, telling him he had been with a woman whose ex-boyfriend barged in and got into a heated argument with her before the two left. Michael was adamant they’d file a false police report against him.

‘A 96 issue’

Unaware the whole situation Michael had relayed to him was a hallucination, Hutzell returned to his vehicle to scan Michael’s driver’s license and run a background check. As Hutzell stepped out of his vehicle to return to the house, Michael exited and told Hutzell the man and woman had returned and were blowing marijuana smoke out the windows. When Hutzell asked to go inside, Michael realized he’d locked himself out of his house.

As they walked around the house, looking for signs of a break-in, Hutzell began to suspect a possible mental health situation. Sitting in his vehicle with Michael and waiting for Carol to arrive, Hutzell radioed to dispatch, “Probably mark this down as a 96 issue,” a reference to an Iowa police 10-96 code pertaining to mental health.

Michael insisted the couple was going to ransack his house, steal items and fill it with cheese. They’d already put his couches on the lawn, he told the officer, whose body camera clearly showed no furniture in the yard.

After Carol arrived, Hutzell told her, “I don’t know if he’s having a mental issue.”

Before leaving with his mother, Michael asked Hutzell what he’d do about the people inside his house. “They’ll steal everything,” he said.

Offering assurance

Hutzell assured Michael he’d take a look around to make sure nothing happened at his house before Carol took Michael home. On the way to her house, Carol said, Michael repeated the story about the couple trashing his house.

“The whole way, he was telling me this fantastic story that didn’t make sense. I’ve never heard him talk like that in my life,” she said.

Once at Carol’s home, she and Michael sat down in the living room. He continued to talk, still not making any sense.

Carol continued to talk with Michael until dozing off around 5 a.m.

When she woke up a couple hours later, he was gone.

COMING TOMORROW: Carol Meredith made several efforts to seek mental health treatment for her son in the hours leading up to his death. None of them were successful.