

Globe Magazine

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NOAH WAS REAL

He was the youngest victim at Sandy Hook Elementary School. A decade later, his parents still fight the conspiracy theorists who deny the massacre even happened.

By Amanda J. Crawford

AUGUST 21, 2022

Lenny Pozner still has the Batman costume loved by his son, Noah, who was the youngest Sandy Hook victim.



Feature

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As soon as news broke about a mass shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, a wave of conspiracy theories and denial began, stoked by Alex Jones and others. When 26 people were murdered at the school, the destructive power of the Internet collided with a shocking tragedy in a way the world had never before seen. BY AMANDA J. CRAWFORD

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TRUTH

FOR

THE

DEAD

A horrific mass shooting. A heinous conspiracy theory. And grieving parents' 10-year quest after Sandy Hook.



The Batman costume loved by Noah Pozner, the youngest Sandy Hook victim, at his father's home.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LAWREN SIMMONS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

BY AMANDA J. CRAWFORD

CHAPTER ONE

VERONIQUE POZNER'S panic was a bird, beating its wings inside her chest.

"Sandy Hook Elementary School," another oncology nurse read aloud from the treatment room television. "Isn't that where your kids go?"

It was December 14, 2012. A Friday. Sophia was in second grade. The twins, Arielle and Noah, were in first. Veronique couldn't tell what was happening. One of her patients shouted: "You've got to go!"

It was normally a 40-minute drive from the New Britain, Connecticut, medical center to Newtown, almost all highway. Veronique drove over 80 miles per hour. She called her children's father and left choking messages. She sucked in air in rapid, shallow gasps. Then the check-engine light came on. It felt like a bad omen.

Lenny Pozner was in Naugatuck, 20 miles from the school. When he and Veronique had separated a year earlier, he'd moved there and got a YMCA membership for himself and the kids. Earlier that morning, after dropping the children at school, he cued up a broadcast — it might have been Infowars' Alex Jones — and got to the Y just in time for the 9:30 a.m. yoga class. *Child's pose. Savasana.*

The first 911 call came in just after 9:35 a.m., reporting gunfire at Sandy Hook school. By the time Lenny finished yoga, his cellphone was buzzing with alerts. He ran to his car and called Veronique as he drove.

The roads in the Sandy Hook part of Newtown were crowded with cars, satellite trucks, and emergency vehicles. Hundreds of students had already been evacuated to the nearby volunteer firehouse, led out of the school clinging onto one another with their eyes closed, as instructed. It was a tragic train of pink leggings and cartoon T-shirts. Veronique parked at a restaurant and ran. She found Lenny at the firehouse, then the girls. They waited for Noah.

Early news reports said that a teacher had been shot in the foot. Those who'd been in the school knew the reality was much worse, but others had

no idea. Sophia and Arielle didn't say much, but seemed distant and glassy-eyed. *As if a twinkle has gone out*, Veronique thought. She told herself she was imagining it. It was almost 50 degrees, warm for December. *After this is over, I can take the kids to the park. Wouldn't that be nice?*

"Why isn't Noah out yet?" she asked.

"He's probably hiding," Lenny said. *Noah is good at hiding.* "Everything is going to be OK." He kept saying it, even after he no longer believed it.

The crowd thinned. Parents claimed their children and went home. But two first-grade classes and several staff members were still missing. In the firehouse, someone put cartoons on a TV for the kids and directed adults to a back room. There, one man knelt on the floor, wailing. Lenny wondered if the man knew something they didn't.

News reports were riddled with errors, made worse by rumors spreading on social media. By late morning, outlets reported that multiple people had been shot at the school and the gunman was dead. But there were also reports of other crime scenes, other shooters, and people being handcuffed. A CBS reporter riffed on live TV about the possibility that "a team of individuals have gotten together and conspired to do something like this." Online, speculation swirled about a purple van.

Around noon, news outlets reported multiple fatalities. Veronique ran to the bathroom and vomited. Then she started menstruating unexpectedly, as if her body were beginning its mourning in her womb.

Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy and local clergy arrived at the firehouse. Rabbi Shaul Praver, who'd presided over Veronique's oldest son's bar mitzvah, tried to comfort her but she was inconsolable. *How can I go on living if my baby is dead?*

Lenny's friend came to pick up the girls. He had known Lenny since they worked together on computers in Brooklyn, New York, during the tech boom of the 1990s. Lenny was a problem solver. He found Lenny lost in silence, running scenarios in his mind: *Maybe Noah is hiding. Maybe he escaped. Maybe they will find him in the woods, at a hospital, down the road.* The friend had heard

the news and worried Lenny did not grasp how bad it was.

Anger was building in the firehouse.

“Will you please just tell us the truth!” one man yelled.

“You have to level with us!” Veronique screamed. “Is it a morgue up there?”

Law enforcement protocol requires that bodies be identified before families are informed of deaths. But five hours had already passed, and identification would take hours more. Governor Malloy decided to tell them himself.

Veronique dropped to her knees. All she could think about was Noah on the school’s cold floor. She begged to take him a blanket. Officials said she couldn’t; it was a crime scene.

They asked what Noah was wearing. The kids had stayed with Lenny the night before. After dinner and homework, they had lit a menorah for the sixth night of Hanukkah. On the way to school that morning, they all sang along to Noah’s favorite song, “Gangnam Style.” Noah giggled as Lenny reached back to tickle his legs as he drove. The last time Lenny saw his son, he was walking into the school with his sisters, one arm through the sleeve of his coat, the other through the strap of his backpack.

“He’s wearing a Batman sweatshirt,” Lenny said.

THE DECEMBER SUN sets early in New England, darkness descending just after the school day’s end. In the waning light at a park near the school, Governor Malloy stepped before a cluster of microphones, clearly shaken. “You can never be prepared for this kind of incident,” he began.

Both students and adults were dead, Malloy said. So was the shooter and someone at his home. State Police spokesman Lieutenant J. Paul Vance then confirmed the death toll: 18 children and six adults had been pronounced dead at the school; two more children were pronounced dead at the hospital. That was about all the information authorities were prepared to release.

The news cycle, like nature, abhors a vacuum. And this was the deadliest shooting at an American K-12 school in history, with twice as many people killed than at Colorado’s Columbine High School in 1999. Reporters turned to tips from unnamed sources and shaky testimony from witnesses and neighbors.

A lot of what was reported early on was wrong. For hours, the shooter, 20-year-old Adam Lanza of Newtown, was widely misidentified in the press by his older brother’s name. Their mother was incorrectly described as a teacher — a convenient explanation for an inexplicable act. But Nancy Lanza had never been a teacher; she’d worked in finance. Before he headed to the school, her son shot her

dead in her bed in the home they shared.

There were also conflicting reports about the weapons. Some early stories indicated the shooter had used an assault rifle but, by Friday evening, the Associated Press and other outlets said he had been found dead with two handguns; a rifle had been found in his car.

Later that night, Lieutenant Vance begged for patience. The investigation would take months, not days. “We want to be able to build a process and build a story,” he told reporters. “An investigation like this is like a puzzle. We want to put this puzzle together and form a complete picture so that everyone, without any doubt whatsoever, can truly understand what occurred.”

But it was already too late to stop doubts. Long



Veronique with Noah in August 2009.

before the shooter fired his first bullets, the seeds of conspiracy theories were lurking in the muck, sown by Second Amendment zealotry and nurtured by institutional distrust. By 2012, trust in the mass media hit a modern low as social media use hit a record high: More than half of all Americans adults now used the platforms. But it would still be years before the impact on public discourse became clear. When 26 people were murdered at school in Newtown that morning, the mainstreaming of the Internet collided with the fresh grief of a shocking tragedy in a way the world had never seen.

Speculation about shadowy forces at work began immediately on a constellation of fringe Internet forums, message boards, and blogs — stoked by well-known conspiracy theorists. “If we start seeing telltale signs of it being staged, we’ll let you

know,” pledged Alex Jones, who’d started Infowars in 1999, as his audience debated the issue on his company’s online forums. Paranoid skepticism on the margins was expected. What was surprising was the heinous twist it would take, and how it would spread.

On the afternoon of the shooting, Newtown Police Chief Michael Kehoe got a hint of what was to come. Even as families waited at the firehouse and the dead still lay on the school floor, he started getting strange e-mails saying the government was behind the shooting, and that the whole thing was being made up to take away Second Amendment rights.

When his cellphone battery died at the crime scene, Kehoe was relieved.

VERONIQUE DREAMT of Noah.

Noah running to give her a hug. Noah, happy and playing. Noah lying on a bench sleeping, but when she tried to wake him up, he was dead. On the first night after his murder, she found herself on an island covered in dead grass. She wandered through vacant houses and abandoned warehouses calling his name. She woke up screaming.

A state trooper had officially confirmed Noah’s death sometime after midnight. In the hours that followed, Veronique became frantic: *I do not want Noah further butchered!* She texted Lenny to stop the autopsy.

Veronique’s family was Catholic. She was born in Switzerland and raised in France until her father, an investment banker, got a job in New York when she was 12. Lenny was born in Latvia when it was part of the Soviet Union. His family immigrated to Israel in the 1970s and later joined relatives in Brooklyn. Along the way, Lenny’s legal name was changed from Russian, “Leonid,” to Hebrew, “Eliezer.” He spoke no English when he started third grade.

By the time Veronique and Lenny met in college, both had lost their accents. They dated for a couple of years and then went separate ways. He moved to Florida, worked in information technology, and rode motorcycles. She became a nurse, married a Jewish man, and converted to raise their two children in the faith. When that relationship soured, she looked up Lenny on America Online. Eventually, he moved north to be with her. Though they weren’t very religious, they raised their children Jewish, too.

Jewish law values the sanctity of a corpse. *And it is not like they don’t know how Noah died*, Lenny thought. He spent the night calling the medical examiner’s office and leaving messages. He finally reached someone, and they agreed to do only an external post-mortem exam. Then, Lenny collapsed into himself. At home the night before he was killed, Noah had stopped playing video games

and climbed onto Lenny's lap. "I love you, Dad." Was he saying goodbye?

Lenny and the girls stayed at the home of their family friends. He was glad to have their help. Sophia had peeked and seen a body in a pool of blood. Arielle heard gunfire as her teacher ushered the entire class into the bathroom, perching children on the sink and toilet to fit them all in. Lenny couldn't stop thinking how close he had come to losing his daughters, too.

Veronique felt like she had been hit by a Mack truck. Her eldest daughter, Danielle, was home from college. "We have been forever changed," Veronique told her.

Danielle suggested they get tattoos to make the mark on their lives visible. Veronique agreed. *It's like we need to brand ourselves*, she thought. *We need everyone to look at it and not let any memories of this fade.* It was overcast as they drove to the tattoo studio. Veronique sunk into the gray like a shroud.

She went home with a tattoo on her wrist of a small pink rose with angel wings. Underneath, Noah's name and the dates of his birth and death — six years and three weeks apart.



Children and adults wait at the Sandy Hook firehouse after the mass shooting on December 14, 2012.

N OAH WAS THE YOUNGEST of the 26 victims, and the only one who identified as Jewish. At a Saturday afternoon press conference, the day after the shooting, Connecticut's chief medical examiner, Dr. H. Wayne Carver II, released the names and ages of the victims. He also confirmed for the first time how they were killed: Each had been shot multiple times with a high-powered rifle.

"I thought the long rifle was discovered *in the car*," a journalist protested, citing the reporting never officially confirmed.

"Not correct, sir," Lieutenant Vance interjected.

Dr. Carver was stout, white-bearded, and bald, with the gallows humor of a man who had spent three decades examining corpses. When asked how the families identified loved ones, Carver said his office "did not bring the bodies and the families into contact," but rather used photographs of victims' facial features to identify them. "You control the situation, depending on your photographer," he said, "and I have very good photographers."

A moment later he chuckled, nervously.

Although the victims' remains were released to families after the exams, Carver's comments made some people watching at home think the families never got to say goodbye. Plus, some thought, Carver just seemed *bizarre*. A growing number of

online skeptics didn't see a man exhausted from examining dead children, they saw something sinister: "He is either under coercion or an imposter," a Florida professor named James Tracy later surmised on his blog.

The eyes of the world were on Newtown. It was the third high-profile mass shooting in the United States in just six months, following murders in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, and in a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Journalists and TV crews invaded the town. Well-wishers sent donations and piled teddy bears and flowers in makeshift roadside memorials. It was a glut of good intentions to be cleaned up later. Millions of dollars to squabble over. Tens of thousands of stuffed animals to distribute. And all that video footage to pick apart on YouTube.

Less than two days after the massacre, the bright lights were already beginning to burn, drawing malicious forces to Newtown. On Sunday, dozens of homes and businesses received threatening phone calls, and authorities had to evacuate a packed Mass at St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church. Trolls spread false information online. Imposters posed as authorities and victims' families, and created false social media profiles for the gunman. A woman in the Bronx, New York, pretending to be Noah's aunt, solicited donations in his name. A notorious con man wandered the streets making videos that proclaimed

the shooting a false-flag attack — a staged operation meant to spur gun control. Before he left town, he impersonated the shooter's uncle, fooling several journalists.

On Sunday afternoon, Lieutenant Vance tried to take hold of the situation. President Obama was coming that evening, and Vance hoped a stern warning would get the chaos-makers to back off. Some of the things happening were crimes, he said. "Prosecution will take place when people perpetrating misinformation are identified."

A few hours later, around the time Air Force One touched down in Connecticut, Vance made another announcement. He was ready to talk about the weaponry. The shooter had two handguns with him and a shotgun in his car — not a rifle as reported. But the primary weapon used was a Bushmaster AR-15 semiautomatic rifle with several high-capacity magazines. "Hundreds of bullets."

"It takes nine months to create a human being," Veronique said, "and it takes seconds for an AR-15 to take that away from the surface of this earth."

T UCSON. AURORA. Oak Creek. Newtown. President Obama's visit was his fourth in two years to a community ravaged by a mass shooting.

Pressure was building for him to act — especially on assault weapons. Though the National Rifle Association had warned of "a massive Obama conspiracy" to destroy the Second Amendment, the truth was that the president had not pushed hard for any new firearm restrictions. In 2010, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence gave him an F on every issue it scored.

The mass murder of young children in the safe space of their first-grade classrooms affected the

president as a father. In a brief television address to the nation that Friday, he wiped away tears.

A prayer vigil was held at the high school. Before it began, Obama met privately with victims' families. He listened as parents described their child's favorite foods or the sound of their laughter. Later, he would recall it as the only time he saw Secret Service officers cry.

In a music classroom, he posed for photos with the towheaded little sisters of a young victim, one wearing the same black and red dress her big sister had worn in a previous family photo. In an art classroom, Lenny watched his daughters talking with the president of the United States. It was surreal. When the president embraced Veronique, she felt compelled to tell him about the dreams in which she was calling for Noah. "If you listen closely, he is answering you," Obama whispered.

By the time he spoke at the vigil, the president was angry and emotional in a way the public had rarely seen. "We can't accept events like this as routine," he said. "Are we really prepared to say that we're powerless in the face of such carnage, that the politics are too hard? Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children, year after year after year, is somehow the price of our freedom?"

He pledged to use "whatever power this office holds" to prevent future tragedies.

THE NEXT MORNING, Monday, Veronique readied slowly, taking comfort in routine. She put on a black blouse with roses and a black skirt, styled her short, wavy chestnut hair, and did her makeup, finishing with rosy red lipstick. She pinned a black lace kippah to her crown and wrapped herself in a knit shawl.

Noah's services marked the start of a week of mourning for Newtown's dead. White balloons lined the street outside the funeral home. A sign in a tree read, "Our Hearts Are With You Noah." Police with bomb-sniffing dogs patrolled outside, worried about threats on social media.

Though it was not in keeping with Jewish tradition, Veronique insisted on an open casket for a small, private viewing. When she saw her son's mangled body, he was so white she thought he looked made of marble. She felt something stirring inside her. She wanted people in power to see what had happened to her little boy. Veronique had invited Governor Malloy, and now took him by the arm and led him to her child's body. She was already sick of hearing people say that "these

little angels just went to heaven." *No, they were brutalized!*

The funeral home required a cover to remain over the mutilated part of Noah's face. It reminded Lenny of a bedsheet, as if his son were sleeping. He leaned down to kiss Noah on the forehead, just as he had always done when he tucked him in at night. The cold shock of his son's refrigerated flesh sent him deep within himself. He sank down onto the pew between his little girls and his elderly mother, a former vice principal now so lost to dementia that she smiled throughout the funeral, not realizing where she was.

Veronique delivered a eulogy. It had been raining on and off all morning. "The sky is crying,



Lenny and Noah in May 2008. In recent years, Lenny has asked not to be photographed because of threats.

and the flags are at half-mast," she began. "It is a sad, sad day. But it is also your day, Noah, my little man."

National media outlets wrote about the Pozners' decision to have an open casket, some calling it Newtown's Emmett Till moment. People at the service said they were impressed by Veronique's poise: She didn't break down until the very end.

But some other people read about Veronique online — about her background or her eulogy or her decision to get a tattoo — or saw her wearing lipstick and giving a little wave to photographers at the cemetery, and came to a much different conclusion: *Would a grieving mother really act like that?*



VERONIQUE'S GRIEF FOR NOAH was a flood. She had to keep moving to stay afloat. One week after the shooting, she stood on Main Street in Newtown with CNN's Anderson

Cooper to do her first media interview.

"It takes nine months to create a human being, and it takes seconds for an AR-15 to take that away from the surface of this earth," she said. "And it wasn't just my son. It was 25 other souls that left this earth that day because that weapon fell into the hands of a tormented soul and that haunts me."

Veronique didn't have answers — just hope that sharing her sorrow could lead to change. Her child was murdered with an instrument of war meant for a battlefield. The assault rifle and high-capacity magazines that allowed the shooter to slaughter her son, his classmates, their teachers, and school staff in *minutes* had been illegal to manufacture in the United States for a decade. The federal assault weapons ban — inspired in part by an elementary school shooting in California — expired in 2004, just before an antisocial kid named Adam became interested in guns and preoccupied with mass murder. Just before his desperate mom bought an arsenal to bond with him.

"Those weapons should not be out in the general public," Veronique said.

If Veronique's grief was a flood, then Lenny's was a whirlpool that pinned him in the swirling currents of his own meticulous mind. He didn't read the news. He didn't spend much time online except to post pictures on his Google+ page: Noah playing in a bouncy castle, hamming it up for the camera. Noah biting into a bright blue cloud of cotton candy. Noah wearing inflatable swim wings at a pool. People posted nice comments of condolence, but there were other comments saying Noah didn't die or that he wasn't even a real child.

Lenny knew online chatter about the shadow government or some such conspiracy was all but inevitable. When a neuroscience graduate student killed 12 and injured dozens of moviegoers with a semiautomatic assault rifle in Aurora in July, five months prior, there had been allegations about government mind control.

When Lenny searched his son's name in early January 2013, he was disgusted at the speculation about the shooting. People called it a false flag.

Mistakes in news coverage had become “anomalies” that conspiracy theorists claimed as proof of a coverup. *Why did the shooter’s name change? Why did the guns keep changing?* Press conferences were analyzed for clues. Vance’s threat to prosecute purveyors of misinformation was taken as an indication they were onto something.

But what concerned Lenny most was their callous scrutiny of the victims and their families. Some people claimed a photo of a victim’s little sister with Obama really showed the dead girl still alive. Others speculated the murdered children never existed at all. They called parents and other relatives “crisis actors” paid to perform a tragedy. And yet, they also criticized them for not performing their grief well enough. There were even claims specifically about Veronique. Lenny needed to warn her.

“There are some really dark, twisted people out there calling this a hoax,” he told her.

Veronique didn’t understand. There was so much news coverage, so many witnesses. “How could that possibly be?”

“If you put yourself out there, people will question your story,” Lenny cautioned.

Veronique thought he must be exaggerating a few comments from a dark corner of the Web. *This can’t possibly gain traction*, she thought. *No, no, no! Truth matters. If I tell my story, people will be able to see that I am a mother who is grieving.*

D OES TRUTH MATTER? Does the grief of so many mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, spouses, partners, loved ones, and friends of those lost in a bloody decade of mass shootings, from a theater in Aurora to a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, from an elementary school in Newtown to one in Uvalde, Texas — and so many other horrors in between — matter?

In the aftermath of the tragedy at Sandy Hook, many Americans still believed it did. They organized and marched, found one another on social media, and formed new organizations that would shape a decade of activism in gun violence prevention. They asked: If not now, when? If not this, what?

But in this fight, they didn’t just face those who would debate policy solutions, they also faced a wave of denial. Denial of cause and effect. Denial of death and grief. And denial that the uniquely American horror of routine gun massacres was happening at all.

In mid-January 2013, the White House rolled out a package of proposals based on the recommendations of a task force led by Vice President Joe Biden, including universal background checks for firearm purchases and a renewed ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. At the same time, the fringe chatter about a false flag

at Sandy Hook leapt into the mainstream.

In the new algorithmic marketplace of ideas online, it is controversy, not truth, that rises to the top. Doubts about Sandy Hook became the test case that showed how a new generation of outlandish conspiracy theories, born and spread on social media, would poison political discourse, polarize Americans, and paralyze public policy.

Designed to build community, social media platforms brought together trolls with malicious intent and conspiracy theorists with outrageous ideas and promoted their views to, among others, gullible, biased, and unhinged people around the globe. And all of the outrage over the conspiracy theories — the angry shares, the public call-outs, the incredulous mainstream media coverage (often linking to conspiracy sites) — just fed the cycle more. For example, Anderson Cooper criticized Tracy, the Florida professor who endorsed the crisis actors myth, thereby introducing the theories to CNN’s global audience.

By the one-month anniversary, a YouTube video pushing doubts about the shooting had been viewed more than 10 million times in less than two weeks. It pointed to conflicting news reports and posited a series of leading questions: “Wouldn’t frantic kids be a difficult target to hit?” “Has the news convinced you there was only one shooter that morning?” It scrutinized silent footage of victims’ families: “Is the behavior you’re witnessing right now, the facial expressions and body language, consistent with that of two parents who just lost their daughter?” Though the implications were heinous, the video was shared by establishment figures — including the 2010 Republican nominee for Connecticut attorney general.

For weeks, America’s most popular conspiracy theorist had been encouraging his audience of millions to investigate a possible false flag at Sandy Hook. By the end of January, he said he had been increasingly convinced.

“In the last month and a half, I have not come out and said this was clearly a staged event,” Alex Jones said. “Unfortunately, evidence is beginning to come out that points more and more in that direction.”

I N HER HEAD, Veronique saw a giant spider weaving all the incongruous threads of theories about the shooting into an inescapable web. Her energy was flagging. *At some point*, she thought, *I will crash.*

In late January, she testified before a legislative panel in Hartford in support of new gun

laws. When another Sandy Hook parent spoke out against the regulations, she was flooded. Outside, gun rights protesters in camo and NRA hats outnumbered those who called for change.

On the drive home in the freezing rain, Veronique wept. *I’m not some crusader*, she thought. Some Newtown parents had gotten together to start a nonprofit, Sandy Hook Promise, to advocate for changes to gun laws and other measures. All Veronique had really wanted was to tell her story. *What people do with it now is out of my control.* She was done.

But Lenny worried about new scrutiny on their family from her testimony. He emailed Jones the next day, appealing to him as a longtime fan and a fellow father. “Haven’t we had our share of pain and suffering?” he asked.

Two staffers quickly wrote back. They assured him that Jones believed Sandy Hook was a real tragedy with real victims. In fact, Jones himself wanted to speak with Lenny.

But first they had a question: “How can we confirm that you are the real Lenny Pozner?”

Alex Jones himself wanted to speak with Lenny. But first they had a question: “How can we confirm that you are the real Lenny Pozner?”

T HE MEDICAL EXAMINER, Dr. Carver, was at home in Avon, Connecticut, when his phone rang around midnight. A YouTuber demanded to know why Carver conducted an autopsy on Noah, who was Jewish. Carver hung up but the man kept calling his unlisted number. He accused Carver of faking the bodies and the assault weapon. Carver told him he’d call the police. “You’ll get in trouble,” he warned. “You’re the one who is in trouble,” the man responded. Carver told police he didn’t feel safe and would take his family and leave town.

Another man called Rabbi Praver, claiming the caskets had been buried empty. The rabbi thought he could reason with the man. He told him he’d seen Noah’s sewn-up body with his own eyes. The man was unmoved. “You are such a good agent,” he said.

People who had been publicly connected to the shooting — officials, neighbors, survivors, family members, first responders, religious leaders — received phone calls and e-mails and ugly comments on social media. Self-described “truthers” began showing up in Newtown. At the school, the firehouse, the local newspaper, the churches, the charities. Even at people’s homes. Assumptions became accusations. Spewing lies, the interlopers aggressively demanded truth.

Online, they dug into people’s pasts and found others with the same names. Veronique got special attention for being Jewish and talking about

guns. She was accused of working for the United Nations. “Criminal Veronique Pozner a Swiss-Israeli diplomat pushing gun control!” read a headline on one conspiracy blog. People scrutinized the details of their lives. Referencing fertility treatments Veronique talked about in an interview, an online commenter wrote: “Maybe it is OK to FIB about killing off an imaginary son who was not conceived naturally?”

On his show, Jones played video footage of Veronique with Anderson Cooper. Pointing to a glitch in the video, he speculated the interview had been filmed in front of a “blue screen,” with the Newtown backdrop digitally added in.

Veronique and Lenny rented an apartment in Danbury, Connecticut, to live together again with their daughters. Their former home in Newtown sat empty. The boiler had run dry and the pipes had burst. A cleanup crew worked on the house with a dumpster out front. Truthers drove by and took pictures that they posted online, along with the Pozners’ property records, speculating that the house was being gutted to destroy evidence. Someone stole the rainbow Noah’s Ark mezuzah from the front door. People sent threats: Someone wrote Veronique on Facebook that she and her family deserved to die. She closed her account; Lenny reported the threats to the FBI.

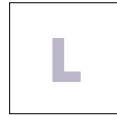
That April, Malloy signed a historic bill that gave Connecticut some of the strictest gun control laws in the nation. But the push for federal reform had already stalled. A bipartisan compromise whittled the federal proposal to a sliver: It would just expand the requirement for background checks to firearm purchases at gun shows and online — measures that surveys showed even most gun owners supported. Former US Representative Gabrielle Giffords — still recovering after being gravely wounded in the Tucson mass shooting two years earlier — returned to the Capitol to push for passage. Still, not enough senators were willing to back even this modest change to gun laws.

In the spring of 2013, conspiratorial beliefs were taking hold across the country. Watchdog groups warned that the number of conspiracy-minded, antigovernment “Patriot” groups had reached an all-time high. When two bombs went off at the Boston Marathon on April 15, Jones, the Florida professor, and many of the others who pushed doubts about Sandy Hook called the bombing a hoax, too.

The next week, a Fairleigh Dickinson University poll exploring the partisan divide over gun control found that 1 in 4 Americans believed facts about

Sandy Hook were being hidden from the public to advance a political agenda.

But some prominent political observers dismissed the poll because they thought another finding was too unbelievable to be true: Nearly one-third of those surveyed, including almost half of Republicans, said they believed an armed insurrection may soon be necessary in the United States.



ENNY AND VERONIQUE decided they couldn’t stay in Connecticut. Veronique imagined a Chernobyl-like cloud hanging over Newtown. She couldn’t breathe. Lenny felt like the Sandy Hook truthers were closing in. But their biggest concern was for their daughters. They didn’t want them to grow up always surrounded by the tragedy. Newtown was branded with it.

Six months after the shooting, they moved to Florida. *We can start again in the sunshine and find some warmth*, Lenny thought. Arielle and Sophia played hangman and bingo on a dry erase board as they bounced between the back seats of the family’s two cars. But by the second night of their journey, it was clear they couldn’t outrun the lies about Noah’s death.

When they stopped at a chain hotel near the South Carolina-Georgia line, Lenny went into the lobby to check in. He handed the twentysomething woman at the counter his driver’s license showing his old Sandy Hook address.

“Oh, Sandy Hook,” the young woman said knowingly. “The government did that.”

CHAPTER TWO



HO ARE THE STEWARDS of truth, and to whom do they owe their proof?

In the aftermath of his son’s murder, Lenny Pozner seethed. He worried about Noah’s memory getting lost in a polluted history. *At a certain point, history can never be righted again.*

Veronique and Lenny rented a town house in Boca Raton, Florida. Pictures of Noah lined bookshelves in the dining room so he could be there for family meals. Everyone went to counseling. Veronique and Lenny went to a psychic. Arielle and Sophia went to an elementary school where classmates didn’t know their brother had died and they had survived a massacre 1,300 miles away. When their school scheduled mass shooting drills, as many did after Sandy Hook, their parents kept

them home. In November, they celebrated Arielle’s birthday with seven extra candles for her twin.

For almost a year, in the absence of comprehensive official reports, speculation about the shooting festered. A few weeks shy of the first anniversary, the state’s attorney for the district released new details: The shooter had fired 154 bullets in less than five minutes; the rampage was over in 11 minutes. A few weeks later, State Police released 11,000 pages of police reports, crime scene photos, 911 call transcripts, and other records. There were redactions and some records were sealed, including crime scene photos showing bodies. Journalists fought for more records. The Sandy Hook truthers demanded more proof.

For months, Lenny had been seeking corrections from news outlets, with mixed success. Every inaccuracy bothered him. “My son was not shot 11 times.” Three bullets from an AR-15 were more than enough to kill him. Lenny harangued *New York Times* editors to change year-old stories that he thought made it seem like he wasn’t at the firehouse or funeral home. “Your article will be on the Internet forever,” he implored, to no avail. Meanwhile, some bloggers had concluded “Lenny Pozner” did not exist.

Just over a year after he buried his son, Lenny buried his mother. That month, Veronique moved out. They would always support each other, but their reunion had been temporary. Veronique wanted to move the girls to a gated community and hide away. Lenny wanted something else, to be *someone else*. *I’m ready to put on a new face*, he thought.



FIVE-CAR MOTORCADE of truthers arrived in Newtown in May 2014, an Infowars camera in tow. They were led by Wolfgang Halbig, a 67-year-old retiree who rose to prominence on an unctuous appeal for answers to 16 questions about the massacre.

Halbig was a portly, German-born, onetime college linebacker with a face like an overripe tomato: If you squeezed his cheeks, he might spit out seeds. He had briefly been a Florida Highway Patrol officer, and worked for a Florida school district, including as security director. After the Columbine High School shooting, he leveraged his experience into a school safety consulting business.

Maybe Halbig was bored when a gunman shot up Sandy Hook Elementary School. Maybe he was mentally ill, as lawyers would later claim, or feeling unfulfilled. For sure, Halbig’s ego was bruised: He mailed a donation to Newtown, then sent e-mails offering his expertise. He got no response and felt snubbed. Then, he saw online speculation about the emergency response. *Why no trauma helicopters?* he wondered. He called Lieutenant Vance and introduced himself as retired law enforcement. When Vance refused to answer his

questions, Halbig was suspicious. He called Newtown police and other officials multiple times a day and filed dozens (soon, hundreds) of public record requests. He ignored logical answers: helicopters weren't needed because the hospital was so close. He fixated on small details, such as who ordered port-a-potties to the school in the aftermath. But the thing that landed him on Infowars as its "leading expert" on Sandy Hook was his claim that officers threatened to arrest him if he didn't stop calling people in Connecticut. It was instant truther street cred.

"I suspect, in my professional opinion as a consultant and doing this a long, long time, I think it's a scripted event that took place," he had said in an interview that Infowars quoted in February 2014. He called the massacre an "illusion." Halbig set up a GoFundMe account to pay for his "investigation" and, with Infowars' boost, raised nearly \$22,000 from more than 400 donors in two months, the news site Vocativ reported at the time.

Along with Halbig in Newtown was James Fetzer, a retired philosophy professor from Wisconsin who cofounded Scholars for 9/11 Truth. At first, Fetzer and others writing for a veterans conspiracy theory website blamed Israel for the Sandy Hook shooting — an allegation picked up by Iranian state TV. Now convinced it was a hoax perpetrated by his own government, Fetzer wore a bulletproof vest under his clothing. He suspected that Newtown itself was "synthetic" — not a real town at all.

The group journeyed through Newtown demanding answers and recording video, trailed by police. They went to the local United Way, the site of the school (it had been razed), and the private, volunteer firehouse. There, Halbig walked into an open truck bay and confronted firefighters with his questions.

"Get the [expletive] out of here!" a white-haired firefighter yelled.

The men squared off. The firefighter raised his hands to Halbig's chest.

"You touch me again, and I'm going to lay you out," Halbig threatened. He backed up just enough for the firefighter to lower the bay door. Halbig laughed, then called 911. He wanted the firefighter charged with assault.

That evening, the group rallied in front of town offices in advance of a school board meeting. A man in Revolutionary War garb hung Governor Malloy in effigy. Gun rights supporters had been coming to Newtown, preaching the gospel of good guys with guns. Now, the Sandy Hook truthers took turns addressing the school board.

"These are your children!" Halbig chided. "We want answers. We want truth!"

Board members sat in constrained silence, refusing to reward the group with reaction or response. Most people in Newtown adopted the same posture: Don't give the conspiracy theories



A January 2020 police photo of Wolfgang Halbig, accused of distributing Lenny Pozner's private information. The charges were later dropped and he has sued the police.

oxygen. Don't feed the trolls.

Not Lenny. He e-mailed Halbig and asked to speak with him. He wanted to invite him to lunch. Maybe, face-to-face, he could reach the doting grandpa inside of Halbig. Another Sandy Hook skeptic, Kelley Watt, acted as intermediary.

"Wolfgang does not wish to speak with you unless you exhume Noah's body and prove to the world you lost your son," Watt wrote.

That same day, Halbig called the police. Watt had told him that Lenny was at the security gate to his golf course community in Sorrento, Florida. (Lenny later said he wasn't there.)

Halbig felt harassed. He told police he didn't know what Lenny would do next.

A S A CHILD in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach, Lenny enjoyed Leonard Nimoy's *In Search of ...* TV show. It explored paranormal activity, unexplained phenomena such as UFOs, and historical mysteries. Each episode started with a disclaimer: "based in part on theory and conjecture." Lenny enjoyed the exercise of the mind. *A premise, superimposed over reality. Then, you follow a tangent.* As an adult, he listened to Alex Jones, Michael Savage, and other modern conspiracy theorists. He wasn't too interested in the New World Order, but he had entertained speculation about 9/11 and enjoyed thinking about geopolitical conspiracies and letting his imagination wander. *What if ...*

Lenny thought all of this gave him special in-

sight into the Sandy Hook truthers. *I see what they see.* If anyone could get through to them, it was him. He told Veronique he wanted to release Noah's records to prove that their son had lived and died. Veronique was repulsed at the idea, but she trusted Lenny. More than half of Americans believed the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a conspiracy, he noted. This would not just go away.

First, Lenny released Noah's kindergarten report card: "Noah is a sweet, inquisitive boy," his teacher had written. Then, Lenny released his death certificate. He would eventually release Noah's post-mortem exam, birth certificate, and many other records, too. Now that the police report was out, a group of online researchers made blogs and videos to debunk the Sandy Hook truthers' absurd claims, point by point. Lenny helped them. Then, he made himself available to anyone with questions.

One of the people he corresponded with was Watt, a middle-aged housekeeper from Oklahoma. When Watt saw Cooper on CNN blasting Tracy, the Florida professor and early proponent of the crisis actor theory, she was intrigued and began doing her own research. She e-mailed hoax videos and memes to Lenny. He sent her debunking links in return.

That June, Lenny sent Watt proof of his identity, gaining admittance to the Sandy Hook truthers' inner sanctum. The Sandy Hook Hoax group started on Facebook soon after the shooting. It was a key place for those skeptical about the "official story" to collaborate, share theories, and persuade others. The page's picture was a ghostly child, dirty and pale, holding a finger to her lips: *Shh-hhh*. It was macabre. But Lenny told them he respected their right to ask questions.

For more than four hours one night on Facebook, members hurled questions, accusations, and insults at Lenny. "Do you accept it was one shooter?" "Do you believe that gun control would have stopped this?" "Did you ever get to view your son after the murder?" "So you are not concerned about the real killers in the purple van?" They called him names — shill, fraud, bottom-feeder — and asked about inconsistencies in news reports and relatives who didn't seem sad enough.

Lenny told them that witnesses in shock get confused, and people grieve differently. He described the carnage when an assault rifle is turned on little bodies.

Some people asked about a satanic cult or the Freemasons. They said dead kids had been seen alive and people would soon go to jail. Lenny told them he didn't understand how they could be so distrustful of government and media but fall for a "scam artist" like Halbig.

"I believe it's easier for people to blame a group for this rather than face reality of this sucky unfair world," Lenny explained. "That's my theory."

Lenny seemed to reach some people. He started

his own Facebook group called Conspiracy Theorists Anonymous for anyone who still had questions. He met parents so scared for their own kids they wanted to believe the massacre wasn't real. He met 9/11 truthers who weren't comfortable with this new breed of conspiracy theory that targeted ordinary people after a tragedy. Some volunteered to help him debunk the lies.

But soon Lenny felt like all the honest questions had been answered. *All that's left are trolls*, he thought. Or people too far gone to reach. With Watt, Lenny encountered the conundrum that journalists, fact-checkers, and academics would reckon with in the years to come: Sometimes, debunking only reinforces beliefs. After dozens of e-mails and phone calls, Watt was more convinced than ever the shooting was a hoax. Why else would Lenny talk to her? *Truth matters*, she thought. *I'm not going to be taken for a fool!*

Halbig's investigation, with its veil of earnest inquiry and Infowars' endorsement, had reinvigorated the Sandy Hook truther movement. People across the country found themselves labeled conspirators. A man stole signs from parks dedicated to child victims and then called their parents to taunt them. Sometimes confrontations happened in person, in unexpected places. Veronique's co-worker at a Florida hospital asked about her tattoo and then told her the government had staged the shooting to take away people's guns. After that, Veronique stopped telling people how Noah died.

Halbig and Fetzer announced that they had conclusive proof that no children were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary. They dismissed Lenny's evidence, and declared Noah's photos fake and his death certificate forged. Halbig set out on a ghoulish pursuit to find victims he was convinced were still alive, maligning living kids and tormenting victims' relatives in the process. Others contended victims never existed. Watt became convinced Noah's pictures were really of his older half brother.

This was no search for truth. These people trafficked in manipulated evidence and ignored facts and reason. Lenny wondered why their heinous preoccupation should be sanitized by the name "truthers"? He wrote an op-ed for the *Hartford Courant* in July 2014 describing the abuse endured by those connected to the tragedy and calling out Halbig and others by name. In it, he gave the deniers a new moniker: "hoaxers."

There was no reasoning with hoaxers. The only thing to do was fight back.

THIS IS HOW totalitarianism comes," Alex Jones warned his audience. First, they come for the Second Amendment. Then, they come for the First.

It was February 2015, and YouTube had restricted Infowars' channels. Thousands of vid-



Alex Jones testifies in a Texas court on August 3.

eos with hundreds of millions of views, representing millions of dollars worth of work. Jones worried they could all be deleted. "If they can do this to us, they can do it to anybody," he said.

Jones had long been a voice on the fringe. But now mainstream Republicans were starting to sound more and more like him. In the 2014 midterms, some candidates for state and local offices had been criticized for promoting doubt about Sandy Hook. A Connecticut legislative candidate was even a member of the hoaxer Facebook group.

In the February broadcast, Jones boasted his show was changing the political agenda. "We're winning. That's why we're under attack."

This time, Jones's enemy came in the form of a man whose son had "supposedly" been killed in the Sandy Hook shooting. Lenny Pozner was part of a "reign of terror" on the Internet, Jones blustered. "You're not gonna run over our First Amendment, you understand that? You're not gonna sacrifice our freedom!"

A few months earlier, Lenny had launched the HONR Network, a nonprofit with the goal to fight hoaxers and hold them "personally accountable" for their lies and abuse. He and his volunteers were Internet vigilantes, fighting on the new battleground of social media. He worked with some former hoaxers on websites to torment deniers and reveal the real people behind the anonymous

Jones had long been a voice on the fringe. But now mainstream Republicans were starting to sound more and more like him.

handles. Sometimes, they employed the same techniques as those they fought: Mock. Dox. Expose. Shame.

They also strategically targeted online content. Early on, Lenny had inadvertently set up a hoaxer honeypot. Photos of his dark-haired, cherub-cheeked boy were widely used across the Web.

Those photos belonged to him. So Lenny and his volunteers used copyright legal claims to attack blogs, videos, social media posts, and websites. A new hoaxer documentary came out around the second anniversary that Infowars praised as a "tell-all, leave no stone unturned work." It included conjecture about Lenny and Veronique. Lenny flagged it on multiple platforms — including Infowars' channels. When YouTube deleted the video, Jones was outraged.

Then, Noah showed up in Pakistan.

After a Taliban attack on a school in Peshawar in December 2014 left nearly 150 people, mostly children, dead, there was Noah's face among memorials to the victims. *Why would they use Noah's photo?* Veronique wondered. She suspected it was a sign of solidarity with US families — a message that no child, anywhere, should die such a violent death. Or maybe it was just another example of how photos get used out of context online? Either way, hoaxers latched onto it as "proof" that Noah was not real. An Infowars article, "Mystery: Sandy

Hook Victim Dies (Again) in Pakistan,” drew thousands of comments. Lenny hit Infowars with another copyright claim, leading YouTube to review its channels.

“You’re just stirring up a hornet’s nest here,” Jones warned Lenny in the February broadcast. In an hourlong rant, he turned Infowars’ outrage machine on Lenny, showing his name and HONR’s Florida mailing address. (Later, another Infowars employee would provide a map.) Then, Jones took a call.

“I can tell you lots about Lenny,” the caller said. “This man is something that you’ve never seen before.”

The caller said he had worked on the new document, which concluded that the mass murder in Newtown was “largely or entirely fraudulent.” He complained that Lenny’s “trolls” had posted about *him*. “These people are vile and, Lenny, if you’re listening: Your day is coming, my friend, it is coming.”

Jones called Lenny’s copyright claims fraudulent. He said he might get lawyers involved and go to Connecticut to investigate the Sandy Hook shooting himself.

“Go after ‘em, Alex,” the caller said. “Crush ‘em!”



WHEN HIS SON DIED, Lenny was overweight at 235 pounds. But in the aftermath, he looked for control. He began what he called a “health journey” that would shrink his frame by 60 pounds.

After Veronique left, he moved to an apartment across from an Irish pub in downtown Boca Raton. It was small and loud, but he liked it. Then, a blogger posted his address, so he moved. A couple of weeks later, a man called and read Lenny’s Social Security number and new address to him. He moved again. Someone posted a video of his apartment’s balcony. He moved again. Someone called his apartment’s management and reported a criminal in their midst. Another move. Lenny got better at controlling his information, with company names and post office boxes in other cities. He reduced his possessions, bought and sold stuff each time, and found a sort of Zen in constantly moving.

At first, Lenny fought the hoaxers because he couldn’t grieve. He needed silence, and all the lies produced an awful din. After a while, it became catharsis. He was methodical, studying the terms of use of each platform, taking one step, one link at a time. He and his volunteers had succeeded in removing hundreds, probably thousands, of links from the Internet, making complaints related to copyright, harassment, or privacy. (“Pozner’d,” some hoaxers called it when content was deleted.) Still, it sometimes felt like fighting a mythical Hydra: If you cut off one head, two more grew in its place. He needed to be patient. He was fighting for

his son’s honor.

But he also took pleasure in messing with the hoaxers. He set HONR’s website to temporarily redirect to the National Security Agency. He leaked a receipt for a handgun and his old concealed carry firearm permit with his Hebrew name, before he changed it to Leonard. It was strategic — *to get into their reality*. But he resented it when people acted like he brought the hate on himself: the local Florida police who told him he should just ignore it when he reported online harassment, people from Newtown who implied that Lenny had made things worse. *I didn’t charge at the hoaxers*, he thought. *I drew a line and said, “No, you can’t say that against my son.”*

Lenny and Veronique had been working with attorneys on wrongful death lawsuits. Along with Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis, the parents of victim Jesse Lewis, they sued Newtown and its school board. Then they went after the maker of the assault rifle. Congress had passed only one major change to a policy related to the firearms industry in the last decade: It made gun manufacturers one of the only industries exempt from civil liability for products. But attorneys had found a novel strategy under Connecticut law, suing for unfair trade practices. They filed suit against Bushmaster-maker Remington with the families of eight other Sandy Hook victims in December 2014. (Insurers for the bankrupt company agreed to a \$73 million settlement with the families in February 2022.)

Lenny began to explore possible lawsuits against Jones and other leaders of the hoaxer movement — men who had wielded mediocre credentials to gain preeminence in a crowd that otherwise distrusted expertise. Halbig, who said he raised \$100,000, took two dozen trips to Connecticut and appeared on Infowars many times. Fetzer compiled articles from Sandy Hook “scholars” into a book, *Nobody Died at Sandy Hook: It was a FEMA Drill to Promote Gun Control*, which called Noah’s death certificate a forgery. And Tracy, one of Fetzer’s coauthors, was still teaching as a tenured professor of communication at Florida Atlantic University.

Lenny complained about Halbig’s fund-raising to the Florida attorney general. When Halbig posted the complaint online with Lenny’s address, he sued. HONR volunteers released a 165-page e-book of their own that scrutinized Halbig’s personal life in hoaxer style. (They’d release similar dossiers on Fetzer and Tracy.) A campaign to drop Fetzer’s book from Amazon succeeded. It was pulled a month after publication.

Lenny had been feuding with Tracy over HONR’s copyright claims for months. After Tracy demanded proof they were really Noah’s parents, Lenny and Veronique took the dispute public. It wasn’t just about Sandy Hook: Tracy was among those labeling almost every new high-profile tragedy and mass shooting a hoax, too. Tracy had even

taught a course on conspiracy theories. “FAU has a civic responsibility to ensure it does not contribute to the ongoing persecution of the countless Americans who’ve lost their loved ones to high-profile acts of violence,” Lenny and Veronique wrote in a December 2015 op-ed for the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*.

Tracy responded hastily online and to the paper: “The Pozners, alas, are as phony as the drill itself, and profiting handsomely from the fake death of their son.” Then he thought better of it. (He later blamed those words on Fetzer.) He sent the *Sun-Sentinel* a toned-down letter for publication that complained he was a victim of political correctness: “My continued research on this topic has developed into a scholarly project that the institution of tenure was intended to protect.” FAU fired him the next month, citing insubordination. Tracy sued in federal court claiming his First Amendment rights had been violated. (He’d later lose those appeals.)

Sometimes, Lenny felt sorry for Tracy. The men were about the same age and lived in the same city. Tracy was a 50-year-old father with young kids and his career was over in its prime. *I did what had to be done*, Lenny told himself.

A few days later, Lenny was in the car with his daughters when he noticed new voice mails. A woman’s brittle voice played over the phone’s speaker: “Death is coming for you real soon.” It gave Lenny chills. He quickly turned it off. The woman was angry about Tracy’s firing. In four voice mails and two e-mails, she accused Lenny of molesting Noah, called him slurs, and threatened him. “Look behind you,” she wrote, “it is DEATH!”



AS THERE EVER any doubt that misinformation could lead to violence? That people convinced they were being lied to — that their country was being stolen, that mass murders were being staged, that children were being kidnapped or raped or left to die — might take action, take up arms, or stage an insurrection? The possibility always seemed to be there, the end of the YouTube video not yet made.

A new era of social media-fueled conspiracy theories had dawned, even if we didn’t quite realize it yet or understand where it could lead. This wasn’t just paranoid speculation about the halls of power. In the years to come, political leaders as well as ordinary Americans — crime victims, first responders, restaurant workers, hospital staff, election officials — would find themselves thrust into absurd plots and accused of crimes so heinous that almost any action against them was made to seem justified. Other ordinary people, insulated by distance and armed with the tools of the virtual world, were encouraged to investigate and take action — egged on by foreign trolls and home-grown demagogues.

American reality splintered, eventually threat-

ening public health and the functioning of our democracy. Every wave of conspiracy theories seemed louder and closer to the mainstream of American political discourse. Each outlandish idea paved the way for the next.

If you believed deep-state operatives were heinous enough to stage a massacre in Newtown and a bombing in Boston, what wouldn't they do?

Or, if you didn't believe it, but you repeated it anyway — or palled around with those who did — what horror wouldn't you espouse? Would any lies be too terrible to tell?

W

OLFGANG HALBIG was thrilled. For years, he had been e-mailing FBI agents, police officers, journalists, political candidates, Infowars staffers, and NRA officials with his allegations about a criminal coverup at Sandy Hook. With folksy faux humility, he'd pledge to atone if anyone would prove him wrong, saying he'd put an apology on a billboard or drive himself to a mental institution. His work took a toll: His wife left, his children wouldn't speak to him, his grandkids were kept away. But no proof sufficed.

In 2016, Halbig thought he was finally getting the recognition he deserved. He got an e-mail purporting to be from Ivanka Trump, inviting him to Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach to share his research with her father's presidential campaign. Halbig was a huge fan of Donald Trump, whose entrance into national politics was propelled by a conspiracy theory questioning the first Black president's birth certificate. Halbig was suspicious of Obama's credentials, too, and believed Trump would expose the government's nefarious schemes. Sandy Hook seemed to him just the first domino in a long line of them.

Trump had already signaled that there were no lies too outrageous for him to exploit. As he emerged as a surprise Republican front-runner, he appeared on Jones's show, courting Infowars' paranoid base and giving the conspiracy theorist a new mark of credibility. At the end of the interview, Trump told Jones: "Your reputation is amazing. I will not let you down."

Halbig packed up his evidence and his business cards: HAVE TRUTH WILL TRAVEL. When he met with people, he gave them bundles of Internet printouts, including an inch-thick comprehensive background check on Lenny Pozner.

He drove three hours south to Mar-a-Lago, thinking about what he'd say. But when Halbig arrived, he was turned away. The e-mails weren't really from Ivanka Trump after all. Halbig had been duped. He thought it was probably the same peo-

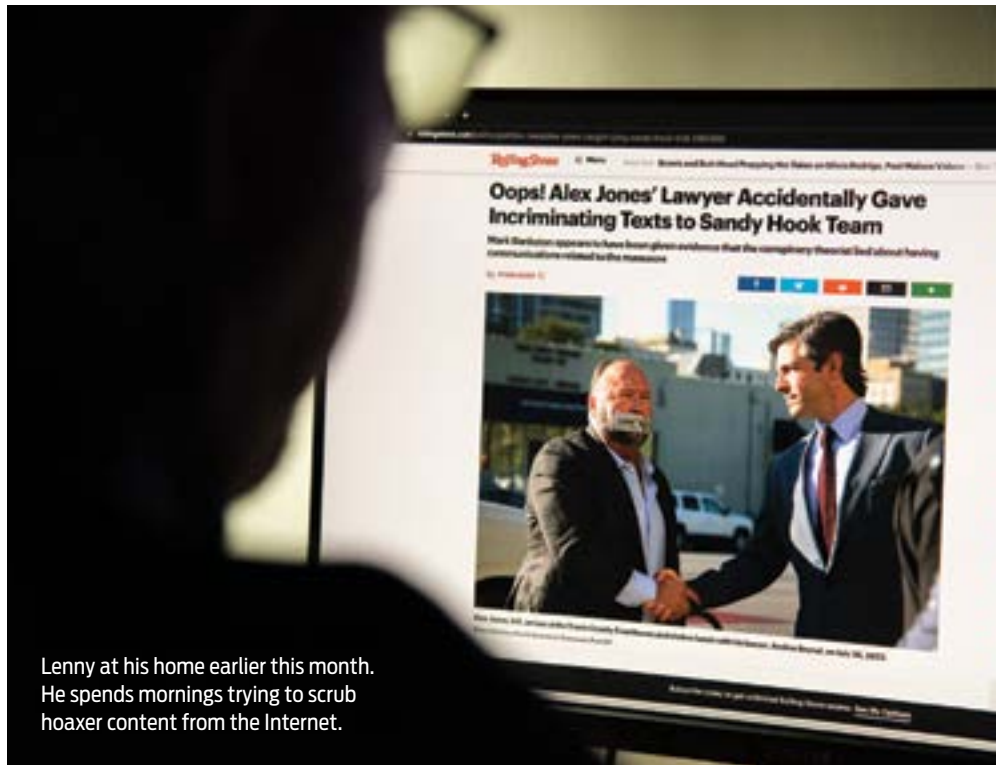
It seemed to Lenny that people were being infected by something online — some contagion that warped reality and eviscerated compassion: a thought virus.

ple responsible for the rubber duckies — once a symbol of healing in Newtown — left on the cars of hoaxers and in his mailbox. He'd taken them to postal inspectors, suspecting they were covered in toxins. He complained to police, repeatedly, that he was being stalked and feared for his family. Then he'd go back to defaming the living and disrespecting the dead.

In June 2016, a gunman opened fire at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando. With 49 people killed and even more injured, it then stood as the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history. The dead had not yet been identified when a writer for *The Advocate* magazine noticed a man at the scene waving a cardboard "False Flag" sign. On his show, Jones speculated that the government allowed the massacre to happen to push anti-hate laws and confiscate guns.

It was hard to tell how widespread these beliefs were. After the Pulse shooting, *The New York Times* found that a search for false-flag videos on YouTube produced 700,000 results. Trust in the mass media had plummeted to a new modern low. Pollsters at Fairleigh Dickinson University asked once again about a hoax at Sandy Hook, getting the same result as in 2013: 1 in 4 Amer-

Lenny at his home earlier this month. He spends mornings trying to scrub hoaxer content from the Internet.



icans said they thought it was possible the Sandy Hook shooting had been faked to increase support for gun control — even though four years had passed with many other shootings and no new federal gun laws at all.

The 2016 presidential campaign was plagued by disinformation. An outrageous new conspiracy theory emerged, derived from innocuous hacked e-mails about pizza and boosted by foreign trolls: Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton and her allies ran a child sex-trafficking ring that kept smuggled children in the basement of a Washington, D.C., pizza parlor. Right-wing sites amplified the ludicrous theory. Jones encouraged his audience to investigate.

Just after the election, Pizzagate turned violent. A 28-year-old believer drove six hours from North Carolina to Comet Ping Pong in D.C. He entered the crowded pizzeria with an assault rifle, firing upon a door as he tried to free the children he believed were imprisoned in the basement.

There were no children. There wasn't even a basement.

O

N ELECTION NIGHT, Lenny found himself at a bar just outside of Boca Raton. He turned to the younger man sitting next to him. "Did you vote?"

The man launched into a long diatribe about the shadow government, then mass shootings. He told Lenny there was proof that the Sandy Hook

shooting was fake. One of the kids died again in Pakistan, he said, this kid named Noah Pozner.

Lenny was shocked. He took out his driver's license and shoved it in the guy's face.

"Look who you're talking to!"

"Oh my God!" the man yelled. "How much did they pay you?"

The day after the Pizzagate incident, a disabled, middle-aged Florida woman was arrested for the threatening calls to Lenny. She pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five months in federal prison, then probation with an unusual restriction: She was banned from websites that promoted hoax theories, including Infowars. "There are no alternative facts," the judge admonished her.

It seemed to Lenny that people were being infected by something online — some contagion that warped reality and eviscerated compassion: a thought virus, passed from one vulnerable person to another. This was a public health crisis — not a free speech issue, he decided. The virus must be electronically quarantined. Eradicated.

EVERY MORNING, Lenny thought about Noah. He kept his son's flip-flops and Batman costume in a dresser drawer so that he would see them when he readied for the day. It kept him closer that way. Then, he'd cross his apartment to the desk where a small, worn photo of Noah was taped near two large monitors. He spent his mornings here scanning the Internet, looking for hoaxer content and petitioning the private companies that controlled so much of modern public discourse to take it down.

It was 2019, more than six years since Noah's death. His son had now been dead longer than he had lived. The girls were teenagers. Veronique had remarried. While she had abandoned social media, climbing out of the cesspool to find some semblance of a normal life, Lenny had plunged in, remaking his life with his mission. They remained good friends and co-parents. Whenever Veronique dreamt of Noah, she texted Lenny the details. A spiritual visitation, she'd call it. When her new husband, an architect, got a job in Orlando, Lenny moved there, too.

In the fall of 2017, Lenny had rented an apartment on the 11th floor of a downtown high-rise less than 2 miles from the site of the Pulse nightclub shooting. Just a few weeks later, a mass shooting at a concert on the Las Vegas Strip left 58 dead and hundreds wounded. Most Americans now got news from social media, but following the shooting the platforms' algorithms churned out mostly fake news and conspiracy theories. False-flag allegations and hoaxer harassment followed the massacre and other assaults: a car attack on counter-protesters at a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, seven weeks earlier; a mass shooting at a Baptist church in Texas a month lat-

er. Then, on Valentine's Day 2018, a school shooting in Parkland, Florida.

As the teenage survivors from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School infused the battered gun control movement with new energy, forces of denial struck back. The day after the shooting, an NRA staff member e-mailed Halbig. "Just like SH, there is so much more to this story," the staffer wrote, referencing Sandy Hook and thanking Halbig for his work. Russian bots spread false-flag and crisis actor posts. Trolls manipulated photos. The teens were viciously mocked by hoaxers and rabid gun rights supporters, as well as by more mainstream conservatives.

Rebecca Boldrick's two children, David and Lauren Hogg, had survived the massacre and spoke out about guns. David soon became one of the most recognizable faces from the tragedy and a powerful voice for change. This made him a target. Boldrick found a video of someone shooting a photo of her son. A popular meme showed his picture next to the Sandy Hook shooter and suggested they were the same person. Another showed him in a Hitler mustache. A video that called David a crisis actor was the No. 1 trending video on YouTube before it was taken down. He was 17 years old.

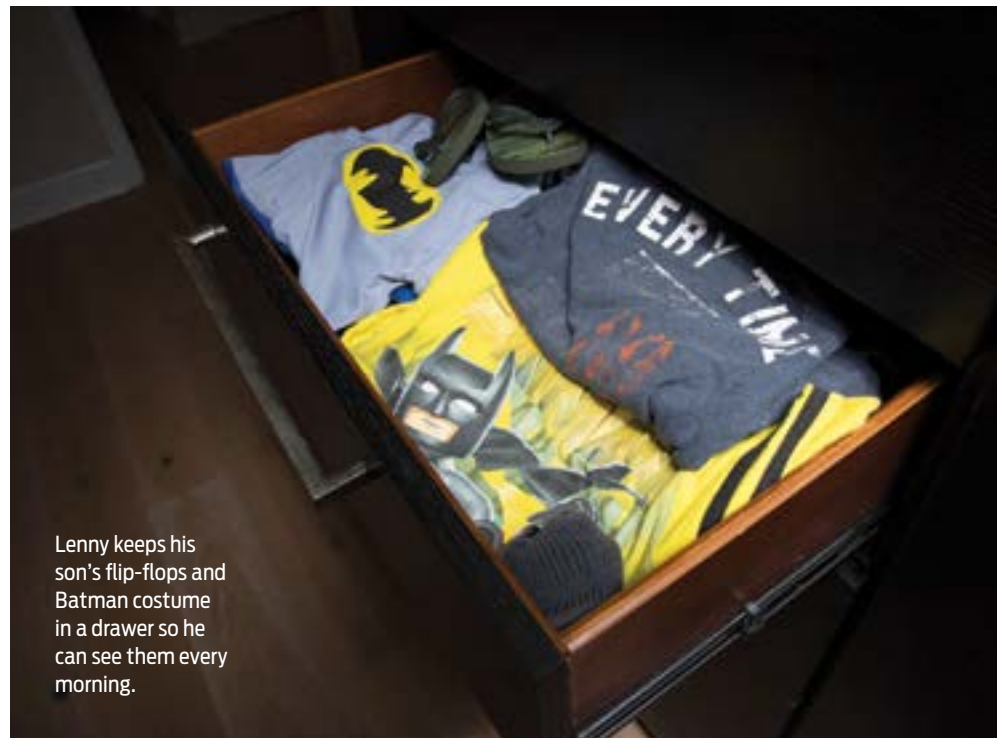
One week after the shooting, facing a tsunami of threats and harassment, the family went into hiding, and Boldrick, fearing for her son's life, reached out to HONR for help. She signed an agreement letting Lenny and his volunteers make copyright, privacy, and other claims on the fam-

ily's behalf. HONR would eventually help take down thousands of pieces of online content about the teen.

Jones and Infowars said the Parkland teens were being funded and given "scripts" — a not-so-subtle dog whistle to crisis actor theories, which was echoed by mainstream conservatives. With Obama out of office, those alleging conspiracies now blamed shadowy forces within the government. Jones called the Parkland teens "the deep state's children."

During the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton's campaign had blasted Jones for his Sandy Hook comments and called out Trump for their connection. (Jones's lawyers would later say it was Democrats who had "weaponized" Jones's "mistakes" about Sandy Hook.) In response, Jones issued what he called his "final statement" on Sandy Hook. He tried to have it both ways: repeating his false claims while expressing sympathy "if children were lost." He concluded: "The only problem is I've watched a lot of soap operas, and I've seen actors before. And I know when I'm watching actors, and I know when I'm watching something real."

After Trump took office, Jones bragged that he had the ear of the president. Former Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly invited Jones on her new NBC show. When Sandy Hook families learned of the prime-time interview, several threatened to sue NBC. Not Lenny. He wrote an op-ed supporting the interview and the public shaming of Jones and his ilk. Lenny's friend and fellow Sandy Hook par-



Lenny keeps his son's flip-flops and Batman costume in a drawer so he can see them every morning.

ent Neil Heslin agreed to go on Kelly's show, where he described holding his dead son in his arms. Another Infowars personality mocked Heslin's statements, summoning the false claim that families never got to see their children's bodies. Months later, Heslin asked Lenny why he was getting calls from hoaxers. Heslin didn't know that Infowars had named him. He joined Lenny and Veronique's quest to find lawyers willing to sue Jones.

Two months after the Parkland shooting, they filed suit in Jones's home state of Texas. Several other families followed with a suit in Connecticut. The lies could no longer be ignored.

The Parkland shooting had triggered Veronique's post-traumatic stress disorder, sending her into a dark place for weeks. Every movement required effort. *Like walking through molasses*, she thought. But she rallied herself to go on CNN after the Jones case was filed. "There has to be a day of reckoning," she declared.

Lenny used the attention to shame Internet companies in the press to change their policies and do more to protect crime victims; he and Veronique wrote an "open letter" to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in *The Guardian*. Social media platforms faced mounting pressure that summer to do more to stop hate, misinformation, and harassment — and to specifically address Infowars. But they also faced scrutiny by Trump and others who accused the platforms of bias against conservatives. The ensuing debate — whether platforms should protect truth or free expression — would embroil the nation for years to come.

In a stunning move in August 2018, Facebook, YouTube, Apple, and other companies acted in near-unison to boot Jones and Infowars from their platforms. Facebook finally closed down the Sandy Hook Hoax page, too. It was a huge victory, but Lenny already had his eyes set on another target: WordPress powered nearly a third of the Internet and had policies crafted to protect free expression that had stymied his takedown efforts for years. Lenny broke his years-long boycott of *The New York Times* to call out WordPress's parent company, Automattic, for refusing to help the families of mass shooting victims. Just days after the *Times* article, the company created a new policy to specifically deal with Sandy Hook deniers. Hoaxers complained about being censored as Lenny did a victory lap. *We have won the info war!*

Months later, as he sat at his computer to do his morning ritual of flagging hoaxer content, Lenny had new tools at his disposal: access to a back-end portal to flag videos directly to YouTube, and contacts he could reach out to at other platforms. He toggled between sites and a list of links that he and his volunteers were going after about Sandy Hook, Parkland, and other recent acts of violence. Lenny calculated that HONR had taken down thousands of links in just a few weeks.

But Lenny knew that there was no end to his



In October 2019, James Fetzer, a retired professor, appears in court in Wisconsin.

fight. Recently, he had been in court seeking a restraining order against an online troll when a man confronted him in the hallway.

"Hey, Mr. Pozner! Is your legal name Eliezer? Do you have any comment on the claim that you're a crisis actor?" the man asked as he filmed a video that would be posted on fringe platforms — part of the splintering of social media that would intensify as mainstream companies sought to address hate and misinformation. "We know the truth, sir. Just remember," the man warned as Lenny quickly walked away.

Soon after, Lenny spotted the man in his neighborhood, walking his little dog. He lived less than a block away. *Too close*. Lenny loved his apartment and had lived there more than a year — longer than anywhere since Noah's death. But the man's proximity had him contemplating another move. One of the websites Lenny worked with had previously mocked the man for being a flat-earthier. *You can't reason with someone who believes the earth is a pancake*, Lenny thought.

Lenny recognized that allegations about his son's death would never go away — and America's misinformation crisis would continue to wreak havoc on individuals and institutions. Enigmatic "Q" signs had started showing up at Trump rallies — a reference to a new, grand conspiracy dubbed QAnon that incorporated Pizzagate and mass shooting denial and painted Trump as a hero in a battle against deep-state corruption and liberal pedophiles.

Lenny focused his attention on the court system. The First Amendment protects speculation about the government and tragedies alike. But lies that damage reputations and inflict emotional

distress are not protected free speech — they can be punished in civil court. As he prepared for the blockbuster case against Alex Jones, Lenny filed another suit that would be a test case: He sued James Fetzer in Wisconsin.



O YOU HAVE children, Mr. Pozner?"

Lenny sat in the witness box in a courtroom in Madison, Wisconsin, in October 2019. It was the second day of the trial in his defamation case against Fetzer. He swallowed, then answered slowly.

"I have two living children and one dead son. My son's name was Noah."

His attorney projected Noah's image on the courtroom screen. Lenny looked up and quickly turned away. Noah was a "regular little boy" who joked with his sisters about working in a taco factory at night, he said. A juror wiped away tears as Lenny described saying goodbye at the funeral home. Attorney Jake Zimmerman asked what it felt like when he discovered Fetzer's writing online.

"I felt like I needed to defend my son," Lenny said. "He couldn't do that for himself, so I needed to be his voice."

By the time of the trial, Lenny had already won. The case was so straightforward that the judge had ruled for Lenny on summary judgment before the trial. He had learned a lesson from his vague lawsuit against Halbig in Florida. When that case turned into a "hoaxer circus," he dropped it, handing Halbig a victory. The lawsuit against Fetzer was intentionally narrow. He sued only over Fetzer's claims in the book *Nobody Died at Sandy Hook* that the death certificate Lenny had shared as evidence of the massacre was fake.

To prove their case, Lenny's attorneys flooded the court with evidence of Noah's existence. They submitted tests from Noah's remains validating Lenny's paternity, an affidavit from the funeral director who filled out the death certificate, and 80 pages of Noah's medical records, starting at birth: caesarean section. Twin birth. "Baby A": 7 pounds, 2.2 ounces. *All normal. Infant vigorous. Good color.* Little squishy footprints in ink. Circumcision. Vaccinations. Trips to the emergency room for stitches and a cough. Then the examination of his corpse, the cause of death in harsh typography: **MULTIPLE GUNSHOT WOUNDS**.

Both the publisher and co-editor of *Nobody Died* settled with Lenny and issued public apologies. Not Fetzer. As a philosopher of science and retired University of Minnesota Duluth professor, he thought his logic was beyond reproach. He had held in his hands a certified copy of Noah's death certificate — with the official embossed seal — yet he was still convinced of his baseless conclusions. (An Urban Dictionary entry years earlier had dubbed this logical fallacy "Fetzerism.")

But because of the summary judgment ruling, Fetzer would not get to present his theories about Sandy Hook to the jury. The only thing they would decide was how much Fetzer's lies would cost him.

"How do you feel when you think about Noah today?" Lenny's lawyer asked.

"Well, when I think about Noah..." Lenny began, and paused. "Well, instead of thinking about Noah and remembering memories that I have with him, I am constantly reminded of all of this hate directed at Noah and me and that I need to do something about it."

At the defense table, Fetzer smirked. *This is not the same person*, he thought. He had been scrutinizing Lenny's appearance — his goatee, his slimmer girth, his earlobes. Lenny refused to appear on camera when he did media interviews, so most of the photos of him online were from before he lost weight. Earlier

in the case, Fetzer had leaked the video of Lenny's confidential deposition to Halbig. Halbig sent stills from it to fellow hoaxers, FBI offices, and media outlets, declaring Lenny a fraud. "How does someone get younger looking since the death of his child?" Halbig asked. (Lenny had been dyeing his hair to cover the gray.) The judge held Fetzer in contempt of court and ordered him to pay \$7,000 for the leak.

When Fetzer took the stand, he presented himself as a martyr for a noble cause. His book had sold 500 copies before Amazon dropped it, he said. Then he posted a free PDF online that had been downloaded more than 10 million times. "The American people deserve to know their own history," he said.

Two of Fetzer's coauthors waited to testify on his behalf outside the courtroom. (They were never called.) Kelley Watt was there with Tony Mead, a lanky Florida man who had been an administrator of the now-defunct Sandy Hook Hoax Facebook group. Alex Jones had said in a recent deposition in Texas that he had been suffering from some kind of "psychosis" and now believed the Sandy Hook shooting had happened after all. "Alex Jones isn't one of us," Mead told people at the courthouse.

As they waited in the hallway, Watt and Mead shared their "evidence" about Sandy Hook with one of the bailiffs. Years ago, when Watt started

her research, people were shocked to learn about her beliefs. Not anymore. Now, they told her they had heard the shooting was a hoax. On a tablet, Watt swiped between photos of Noah and his older half brother that she thought looked too much alike. Even after all the evidence in this case, she still thought the photos were proof that Noah never existed. Later, she boasted that she had the bailiff convinced. ("Bullshit!" he roared in denial.)

In closing arguments, another one of Lenny's attorneys said Fetzer's false statements about Noah's death certificate "went around the Internet like a virus." They were still spreading today, she said. Fetzer's attorney argued there was no proof that the specific false statements at issue harmed Lenny.

After jurors left to weigh their decision, a small crowd of Fetzer supporters, curious onlookers, and journalists lined

up the hallway. Democrats would hold the largest presidential primary debate in US history later that evening in their quest to unseat President Trump. But here, in a state court in Wisconsin, was one of the first tests of the post-truth era of how the court system and ordinary Americans on a jury would hold a conspiracy theorist accountable under defamation law.

A flannel-shirted union activist and blogger who said he thought Fetzer was insane loudly debated the events surrounding the Sandy Hook shooting with an older physical therapist who once ran for Congress and was there to support Fetzer. Even as the older man asked reporters basic questions about the shooting, he insisted there were "so many anomalies" that there was no way it could have happened.

As he spoke, one of the news reporters listening to the man looked increasingly frustrated.

"Who gets to determine what's true and what's not?" he loudly demanded of the crowd.

Exasperated, the reporter raised her hand to her temple in the shape of a gun. ■

"Well, instead of thinking about Noah ...," Lenny said, "I am constantly reminded of all of this hate directed at Noah and me and that I need to do something about it."



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HE WISCONSIN jury unanimously awarded Lenny Pozner \$450,000 in his lawsuit against James Fetzer; the amount was later increased to more than \$1.1 million. To help satisfy the

claim, the judge awarded Lenny the copyright to *Nobody Died at Sandy Hook*. He has used it to get the PDF taken down online. Fetzer has petitioned the US Supreme Court to review his case.

Wolfgang Halbig was arrested in January 2020 and charged with harassment for distributing Lenny's Social Security number and other personal information. The charges were later dropped, and Halbig has filed suit against the police.

In May, a gunman with an assault rifle murdered 21 people at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. The massacre and other recent mass shootings again drew attention to US gun laws. The next month, Congress passed a bill that would enhance background checks for young buyers and increase school security funding, among other measures. It did nothing to address the availability of assault weapons or high-capacity magazines.

Two days before President Biden signed the bill, the US Supreme Court struck down a century-old New York law that restricted concealed carry of firearms, casting gun restrictions across the country into doubt.

Alex Jones is now under scrutiny for his role in the events leading to the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol. He was found liable by default in fall 2021 for defaming and inflicting emotional distress on the Sandy Hook families. In the first of three trials, jurors awarded Sandy Hook parents Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis nearly \$50 million. Some of Jones's companies have sought bankruptcy protection.

Lenny and Veronique hope to get their day in court in Texas this fall.

Amanda J. Crawford, an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Connecticut and previously a reporter for Bloomberg News and other publications, is writing a book about the fight against misinformation after Sandy Hook. Follow her on Twitter @amanda-jcrawford. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

A Note on Sources: This story was drawn from hours of in-depth interviews, hundreds of pages of police and court records, videos and other Internet records (including Web pages preserved through Internet Archive), and contemporaneous news reporting. Support for travel and research was provided by the University of Connecticut and the UConn Humanities Institute. Additional research by UConn undergraduate researchers Wyatt Cote, Brianna Hidalgo, and Colm O'Reilly.