

MIKE GATTO

My name is Mike Gatto. I am one of those rare species of lifelong Angelenos. I was born in a neighborhood that is now called Franklin Hills. Back then, it was just called Los Angeles. I moved when I was four to a community called Silver Lake. I grew up in Silver Lake and lived there for much of my adult life.

'My first reaction was disbelief.'

On November 12, 2013, my father was killed in a home-invasion robbery at the house I grew up in. It was very sudden. Just like most acts of violence, it came completely out of the blue for us. It was kind of hard to believe for such a long time. I used to go to bed with a copy of the newspaper article on my nightstand, because I would wake up thinking it was a dream. It was so hard for us to grasp that he was gone. We still don't know who did it. The police have their profiles, and they have people of interest or a person of interest. What we were told is that there was a car burglar who got chased by some people. He somehow ducked into my father's house, went up to his bedroom and shot him. Just so out of left field.

When I was a child, Silver Lake was not considered an upscale neighborhood. It was considered lower middle class. There was crime. Up until the time I was in high school, people made fun of me for living there. As I grew older, Silver Lake became very gentrified. There is this perception that it's now a nice neighborhood. I have always loved Silver Lake. It always felt like home. I always felt safe there, even during periods when crime was higher. The statistics tell me my father's murder was the only murder in Silver Lake that year. For a crime like that to happen the way it did, the manner it did, in the neighborhood it did, it was a bit out of the blue.

I was in Sacramento when I got the news. I was serving in the state legislature at the time, and I had two young daughters. I was about to put one to bed that night and my little sister called me. I don't usually pick up my phone, but something told me to pick up that time. It might have been that she called twice, or it might have been strange to me that she was calling me at 7:45 p.m. on a weeknight. I picked up the phone and she said, "I went over to dad's house. He hadn't been responding to my calls. I found him in his bedroom, and I think he's dead."

My first reaction was disbelief. My father was in the peak of health. He was a very strong, very active man. We would see him deadlifting trees or the plants in his yard. He would come to our house and he'd sprint up the stairs. He was very active, very healthy. Plus, he had taken some sort of genetic test and they said that he had the centenarian gene that indicates you're going to live long; my dad had a lot of those

markers. So, my first reaction was disbelief. I said to my sister, “Well, call an ambulance!” She was like, “He's cold.” I was blown away. I guess it was pretty dark in there and she was not aware that he had been shot. The paramedics came and they confirmed that he had been shot. It was very troubling.

‘It was so difficult to lose him that day.’

I immediately got on the phone and started calling people I knew who were in law enforcement. I finally got connected with the people on-site. Whenever a crime scene like that happens, they show up and work very hard to gather physical evidence. It was a very long process. My father's case now has gone on for 11 years. There have been moments where the police have been very helpful. There have been moments where they have been very insensitive.

My dad was a beloved member of the community. He was 79 at the time of his murder. He was a retired teacher. He was the founding Visual-Arts Dean at the LA County High School for the Arts. He was one of those really beloved kinds of old guys that are the pillar of the community in which they live. It was so difficult for the community to lose him that day.

Death is a part of life. We all know that we're going to die at some point. We love our parents. We love our loved ones. But if someone gets a terminal disease, you have a chance to comfort them, to stand at their bedside. You have a chance to ask them all the questions you always wanted to ask, to say goodbye. You have a chance to help them plan and be there when they're going through a very hard time. But when somebody is a victim of violence, it's one day you get the call and they're gone. All the things you wanted to ask, to do with them, there's no chance, because they're suddenly gone. I think all of us suffered from a sense of disbelief. I remember one of my sisters at the funeral looking at the body and saying, “This isn't my dad. This isn't my dad.” She couldn't believe that this had happened. I remember feeling the same way. It was so hard to believe he was gone. I relied on my friends who have gone through similar things. I have three friends who lost a parent way too early and they were a tremendous support to me. I know that I was very lucky to have that support network.

‘Grief does lessen, but it doesn't ever go away.’

I have an older sister and a younger sister. They already were kind of tense before my dad's murder. So, you build on that tension, the added stress of something like this, the trauma and grief. My father didn't expect this, of course, so his personal affairs were not in order. It really affected my family in a very poor way. It tore my family apart.

I realize this is totally unique to my experience, but the first thing I noticed were all the people who wanted me to become a poster child or a spokesperson, or to somehow politicize my dad's death. I resisted for years to even talk about it publicly. I didn't want to politicize it at all. My dad was so much more than the father of an elected official. I know that one of the reasons why his case got so much attention was because I was in public office and because now I'm on TV.

What I try to do is work for all the families who don't have those connections. The tragic truth is that there are so many homicides in Los Angeles County, and a large number go unsolved. Most of these victims' families, they toil away in obscurity. Whenever I talk publicly about it I try to think about those families. I try to speak for them.

We moved away from Silver Lake because it was too hard. My dad lived on the west side of Silver Lake and I lived on the north side. I could see his house from mine. Even if I was in my own backyard, I could see his street. It was really weird how his murder turned my beloved childhood neighborhood into a place that I don't want to go to. One of the theories is that the killer fled down what we call "community stairs." People call them a "walk street" sometimes. That was the walk street I used to sit on with my buddies in high school and talk about life and girls we had crushes on, things like that. It's a place that I had such joyful memories and it's been turned into something that I really don't want to even think about. Over time, grief does lessen, but it doesn't ever go away. It doesn't ever get to a point where both your heart and your head understand clearly that this person is gone.

'Where's the channel for my grief?'

In the days after, leading up to the funeral, there's this tremendous outpouring of concern and caring. It does naturally peter off in time. People have busy lives. But at the same time, it's hard when you don't have answers yet. You still are going through a grieving process. You always like to think there's people out there who are thinking about you as well. I am very grateful for all the help the community provided to me and my family. It was so nice to get cards from random strangers. I still do 10 years later. I got contacted by a lady that my father taught as a student a month ago. She said, "I bought a bracelet from your dad." My dad made jewelry when he was retired. "Do you want to give it to your daughters?" It was tremendously moving.

My dad was a great teacher. He was beloved by all his students, by his family and by his community. The hardest part for me? I have three children. One of them was very close with him, she was born first. The second one got to meet him, but she doesn't have any memories because she was very young when he was killed. My third one never met him at all. That's the hardest part for me. I have been able to get over everything except for how it affects my kids.

The first three to four years [after my father was killed], I feel like I was a very bad friend, a bad husband, a bad father, a bad assemblyman. I was so obsessed with the case – it was a full-time job. Part of my coping was, *I've got to try to learn everything about what was going on in my dad's neighborhood that night. I've got to try to talk to all the neighbors. I've got to try to do everything that I can to try to be as useful as I can.* Otherwise, where's the channel for my grief? I would write down every clue. I felt like I had to do it. The obsession has lessened with the passage of time. But certainly, for a long, long time, it felt like a full-time job. I've evolved I suppose to: "I'm not going to let this define me. I'm going to go out there and I'm going to try to help other families."

I had to reflect for a long time to figure out the ways that I changed. [Now] there's a tendency that I've noticed in myself and other family members where you catastrophize everything. Like, *what's the worst that could happen?* That is not healthy. That is not a good thing to do. The other thing that changed for me is for the first year or year-and-a-half after my dad's murder, I could not watch TV. We would sit down and be like, "Okay, what's on tonight?" You have shows about murder, the two or three top-rated shows were all about murders. I was living in this very dark place where my dad had been murdered in his house. I didn't want to see it. You realize how much of American culture is based on violence. It changed me in so many ways. I'm a little more risk-averse now, but when I notice, I try not to let it define me.

'We hope for justice.'

There are three things I think the County could do. The first thing is that about 50% of murders go unsolved and it takes a community to solve a crime. I'm always amazed that the murder clearance rate has gone down in the era of DNA. I think that's because police don't talk to the community as much as they used to. For the longest time, in my dad's case, we begged the community to come forward with information; we needed a sketch. My dad's case happened to be front-page news. We had press conferences. We had vigils. There were helicopters and news cameras. The County's efforts to publicize rewards to bring the community out, those have a value because it takes a community to solve a crime.

The second thing, which I don't know how the County can do, is build that sense of community. When somebody is going to perpetrate a crime, I guarantee there's somebody in that person's life who senses that person is going down the wrong path. Not always, but I think a sense of community and making everybody feel like they are listened to and that their problems are heard will reduce the number of school shootings, will reduce the number of crimes – it will reduce all those bad things. Any efforts the County can do to foster that sense of community are important.

The final thing is tough to talk about but it's a truth that I have to say. I've talked with so many families of murder victims and everybody is terrified that their family member's murderer will be caught, but

that somehow they will slip through the justice system. That could be by getting let out on bail when they shouldn't be. It could be because the prosecutor does not charge them with a crime that is high enough for what they did. That is something that I'm terrified of. That someday, my dad's killer will be caught and somehow the justice system will say, "Well, you know, let's let this person off with a slap on the wrist." Don't get me wrong. I'm not a "lock him up and throw away the key" type. I try to approach criminal justice with nuance even with what I've been through. But at the same time, there also have to be consequences for somebody doing something like this, and the County plays a major role. We hope for justice.

'Gone too soon.'

Nobody's going to care more about your relative than you. That's natural. The police, you're probably going to bug them. You've got to shamelessly keep on them. Don't ever feel like you're a bother.

When I meet people in the same situation, I try to just listen. I try to help them as much as I can by letting them put some of their grief off on me. There's really very little, in my experience, that you can say. The most important thing is being a good friend and listening. I have gotten involved with a number of victim groups. The biggest thing that I can offer them is honesty and a shoulder to cry on.

I already mentioned how full of life my dad was and how strong he was. Before my wife and I had our first kid, we were kind of struggling with money and our refrigerator broke. We called him to tell him that our refrigerator broke and we could lose all of our produce. 15 minutes later, my wife gets the door. Here he is holding onto a whole refrigerator. It was a mid-size refrigerator and he's standing there deadlifting it. He had these giant hands and these giant wrists. My wife's said tongue-in-cheek, "There's this old Italian man at our deadlifting up a refrigerator." That was my dad. Just full of life. He was strong. He always wanted to help. Gone too soon.

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