

THE LETTER SEASON 1, EPISODE 3: A Gun and a Death Wish

Amy Donaldson: This episode includes descriptions of gun violence and suicide. Please take care when listening.

Dispatch: While you were on the call at Storm Mountain, we responded East Patrol on a suspicious in Parley's Canyon by Little Dell. Um Apparently he's got two gun shot victims there, if you want to head up there now.

(Road Sounds)

Amy Donaldson: Keith Stevens was the homicide detective on duty for the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office when this call came in. It was around 10:20 p.m. August 28, 1996. He was driving his unmarked patrol car along a road that snakes along the base of the Wasatch mountains.

To the west were the lights of the Salt Lake valley, a community laid out in an orderly grid system. To the east loomed the wild of the Wasatch, with canyon scenes illuminated only by the light of a full moon. It was about a 10 minute drive to Little Dell Reservoir.

As he arrived, he saw in his headlights a grim scene. Paramedics were working on a badly injured young woman, 18-year-old Yvette Rodier. He parked on the shoulder of the road and got out of his car. He heard Yvette telling rescue workers that her friend had been shot down the hill, closer to the water. Detective Stevens made his way past the frantic scene, through the dirt parking lot and down the paved path where he found the lifeless body of Zachary Snarr.

Keith Stevens: Go down and find an individual that is deceased, blood covered, with a lot of personal items around, a camera, tripod, blanket.

Dispatch Tape: If you copy me, we do have one echo up here.

Amy Donaldson: Echo. That's the police code for a fatality.

Keith Stevens: He was already in the throes of being dead for a little while, so he was very cold, very stiff.

Amy Donaldson: Keith called for the medical examiner, while paramedics loaded Yvette into a helicopter. Police attention shifted to the suspect. Their first clues were a missing Bronco and an abandoned white truck.

(DISPATCH TAPE)

Keith Stevens: At this time it appears that the victim's vehicle was taken by the suspect. They don't know who he is. It's a Bronco, and that's as much as I've got right now.

Keith Stevens: We knew that Zachary's vehicle was gone, and there was a vehicle left there, there was a vehicle registration there that provided us with a name, address. So immediately, people were dispatched from the scene without having any real information other than we have two people that have been shot. So it's inherent that you better be careful when you're starting to follow up this information. The individual's obviously armed and dangerous.

(Theme Music)

Amy Donaldson: From KSL Podcasts, I'm Amy Donaldson, and this is The Letter. Episode 3, A Gun and a Death Wish.

(BREAK)

Amy Donaldson: When police checked the registration of the pick-up truck that was abandoned in the Little Dell parking lot, they learned it belonged to a 19-year-old man named Jorge Benvenuto. By 2:20 a.m. Detective Bob Bobrowski was talking to his older sister Monica in her apartment on the west side of Salt Lake City.

POLICE: Monica, what I'd like to do is kind of go over a few events with you. Maybe you can kind of help us out and see what's going on. Tell me what's up with your brother.

Amy Donaldson: Monica began by telling police her brother had been staying with her for the last week. She said he planned to move out of state in the next few days, and that he'd recently purchased a gun. Earlier that night, she'd returned home to find her building manager and police trying to enter her apartment after reports of a gunshot from inside. She showed detectives a bullet hole in the wall above her sink. Her brother, however, was gone. She had no idea what happened.

But buying that handgun, she told them, had prompted new and concerning comments from her brother.

Monica Benvenuto: It was mainly after he got the gun that he's been talking about killing somebody.

Police: Why?

Monica Benvenuto: Just for no reason.

Police: Killing who?

Monica Benvenuto: Anybody.

Police: Is he angry at something right now?

Amy Donaldson: Why would a 19-year-old with no criminal history shoot two people he didn't know? The answer would prove to be elusive for everyone involved. Even for those who knew and loved Jorge Benvenuto.

Monica tried to explain to a TV reporter that her brother's decision to buy a gun was prompted by a theft.

(TV CLIP)

Reporter: Monica benvenuto says her brother talked about shooting the people who broke into his apartment a few weeks ago.

Monica Benvenuto: I told him it's not worth it. To spend the rest of your life in prison for somebody that took some stuff.

Reporter: But then she says Jorge Benvenuto said it didn't matter who he shot. He just wanted to know what it would feel like.

Amy Donaldson: Overnight, THIS became the story ... a man who just wanted to see what it felt like to kill someone, anyone. Journalists quickly labeled it 'a thrill kill'. As police chased every lead, a narrative took shape. And it would shock everyone involved.

Months after the shooting, Detective Stevens talked with those who knew Jorge. But they could only provide pieces of why he shot two strangers.

Keith Stevens: Okay, I want to talk to you a little bit about an acquaintance you have. Towards the end of summer, middle of summer, an individual named George or Jorge Benvenuto. Do you recognize the name? Do you know who I'm talking about?

Tom Watson: Yes, I do.

Amy Donaldson: Tom Watson lived in the same apartment complex where Jorge lived earlier that summer.

Keith Stevens: How did you first become acquainted with Mr. Benvenuto?

Amy Donaldson: Tom said he and his wife only really got to know Jorge after his apartment had been burglarized in the last week of July.

Tom Watson: He asked us if we had seen anybody that looked suspicious that may have broken into his apartment. He said his apartment had been broken into that night. And we told

him no. And about an hour later, he came back up to our apartment and was telling us what all supposedly had been stolen.

Keith Stevens: Did you at the time then begin, for lack of a better term, a friendly relationship with Mr. Benvenuto?

Tom Watson: I would say so, yes.

Keith Stevens: Okay. Describe that for me.

Tom Watson: He started coming up to our house, and we thought it was kind of weird because he never brought a friend or anything with him. But he started coming up to our house and he would sit for three or four or five hours at a time. And he didn't have friends of his own. And my wife even asked him if he had a girlfriend. And he said, Well, he had one in New York. But he didn't have one here.

Amy Donaldson: Jorge had only moved to Utah from New York in the fall of 1995. For about nine months he lived with his brother, Pablo, in Provo. But once Pablo got married, Jorge moved in with his sister in Salt Lake City. When Monica moved to a new place in mid-July, her brother stayed in the apartment they'd shared for a few weeks after she left. That's when he befriended Tom.

Tom Watson: But he came to our house quite regular, I would say three to four times a week. This was a period of a month. And he got to know us pretty well.

Keith Stevens: During these visits to your home, did he describe how he felt about having someone break into his apartment?

Tom Watson: Yes, he said he was very angry. He thought that the man that lived all the way to the end of the hall from where he lived on the left hand side - he thought that he had broke into his house and he said, if he had had the gun he ordered at that time, he says I'd go down there and shoot him. And he seemed very disturbed.

Amy Donaldson: Monica said her brother was very upset by the break-in, and his response was centered on buying a gun.

Monica Benvenuto: Somebody broke into the apartment, and stole a lot of his stuff. A couple of times this happened. Somebody broke in and took all his tools. He had a TV. All this stuff is his. So he was really upset about that. That's when he got the gun.

Amy Donaldson: At just 19 years old, Jorge was too young to legally buy a gun for himself, but police learned from Monica that he got some help. He had befriended an older co-worker at the car dealership where he worked. His name was Evan Smith, and he already owned a pistol and

a revolver. That summer, Evan told police, he took Jorge shooting with him in the desert west of Salt Lake City.

Evan Smith: So we went out to some public land, out south of the west desert and just went and shot some bottles and cans and whatever was out there. People take out old microwaves and barrels and things to shoot at. So we did that that weekend.

Keith Stevens: Do you remember approximately when that was?

Evan Smith: Close to the end of July.

Amy Donaldson: Evan said Jorge had an idea of the kind of gun he wanted for himself.

Evan Smith: He had mentioned that he was looking at some pistols - and how he liked the 44 and I thought it was just - he'd been watching too many Dirty Harry movies or something, you know.

Keith Stevens: Huh

Evan Smith: He liked it because it was big and it was loud and it had a big bullet.

Amy Donaldson: The next weekend, they went together to a retail shop where you could try out guns in the basement. They chose the kind of revolver that Jorge was interested in, and shot 50 rounds.

Evan Smith: And he just fell in love with it right then and there.

Amy Donaldson: On that trip, Jorge decided he wanted the Colt Anaconda 44 magnum with a six inch barrel, but since he was under 21, he needed help acquiring it.

Evan Smith: So we talked about it for a while, and he finally convinced me to buy the gun for him.

Amy Donaldson: Evan said he put the gun on layaway, but Jorge made the payments. Unlike other forms of credit, layaway doesn't allow a person to take possession of the items until it's paid off. Evan said Jorge paid the \$450 owed in just a couple of weeks. The informal agreement was that they'd share the gun.

Evan Smith: I don't know if, you know, I was just the gullible one - you know the one person that he found that would actually do it for him or what, but I guess at the time it seemed like an okay thing to do. Now that I think about it, it was pretty stupid.

Amy Donaldson: Evan said Jorge seemed pretty responsible when they went out shooting together. He tried to teach him some gun safety.

Evan Smith: Didn't seem like he'd ever shot a gun before.

Amy Donaldson: They picked up the gun on a Saturday and immediately took it out target shooting.

Keith Stevens: Would there be a location out there or a specific item that you shot? That if we went out there we could recover a slug? Do you think that would be possible?

Evan Smith: Um, actually, believe it or not, I have a stump of wood in my garage that has a slug from that particular pistol in it.

Amy Donaldson: Evan explained that they were testing the power of the magnum with Hydra Shok bullets. That's a type of ammunition commonly used for self-defense because it's designed for deeper penetration and expansion when fired. In other words, Hydra Shok bullets were popular because they neutralized any threat. They found a lean-to structure and Jorge tried to shoot a piece of wood off of it.

Evan Smith: We got a piece of it off, and in the piece of it that we got off was one of the slugs.

Amy Donaldson: Evan said they threw the piece of wood in the back of the truck and took it home, because Jorge wanted to show it to people.

Keith Stevens: Did he ever express while you were out there blowing things up that he wanted to see what it would be like to shoot someone, a human being? Did that ever come up? Or, you know what, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but similar to 'I wonder what this would do?'

Amy Donaldson: Evan remembered a moment when Jorge attempted to fire the gun at a rock at close range, something he felt was reckless.

Evan Smith: I turned around and there is two feet away from this rock, pulling the trigger and I went AHH! cause I thought it was gonna, you know, kill him. Well, it didn't do anything. And it pretty much shattered the rock. And he came back and he says, Wow, that was cool. And I says, Man, that was stupid going and shooting a rock like that, you know, you don't know if it's gonna ricochet and a piece of rock's gonna come up and hit you. He said, if it would do that to rock, I wonder what this would do to a human?

Amy Donaldson: Evan can't quite remember exactly what he said in response to this question, but Keith asks, "you're pretty sure you had that conversation?" And Evan confirms.

Evan Smith: Well, yeah, he says, he said, kind of that, you know, I wonder what this would do to a person? And I says, well I don't know, why don't you go shoot a rabbit and find out or something like that, you know? I honestly never really thought he would use it to shoot a person.

Keith Stevens: No, I don't think anybody...

Evan Smith: I didn't think he was the type of person to do that. You know, maybe that's a serious character misjudgment on my part.

Amy Donaldson: One of the first people Jorge showed the gun to was his neighbor Tom Watson. Tom remembered Jorge bringing it to his apartment the same day he first took it target shooting.

Tom Watson: It was fully loaded at the time. We didn't know it was loaded. And he was playing with it, spinning the chamber, it was just like he was obsessed with it. He couldn't keep his hands off of it.

Keith Stevens: Where did he keep the gun?

Tom Watson: In his waistband of his pants. He carried it with him religiously.

Keith Stevens: Did you have a conversation or speak to him the week of this incident, the August 28 incident where we're investigating him for the shooting of the two kids up the canyon?

Tom Watson: Yes. Monday, the 26th of August. He came to our apartment, he was there approximately two hours. And during that time, he told us, he patted his side and he said you know what? He said I'm gonna have to take this gun and I'm gonna have to go out and shoot somebody. He says I really want to see what it'll do to 'em. And he said shooting targets is not fun anymore. And this was on a Monday.

Keith Stevens: Okay. When, when he was talking about that, did you have any realization that he was serious about what he was talking about?

Tom Watson: We thought it was all a joke. We just told him, we said, yeah, go out and shoot somebody and you spend the rest of your life in jail. And he says, Oh, I'm not worried about that, they would never take me alive anyway.

Amy Donaldson: That was the last time that Tom saw Jorge in person. After the break, Jorge disappears with the gun.

(BREAK)

Amy Donaldson: Jorge's co-worker Evan said that weekend of target shooting would be the last time they would spend together. Jorge had been talking about moving to Las Vegas, so Evan wasn't surprised when Jorge came in the Monday before the shooting and quit his job. He said he'd be leaving by the end of the week. But the next morning, Evan said Jorge was fired.

Evan Smith: I came back to the main counter, and his stuff was gone and he was gone. I guess it was destruction of property; they found out he had broken or destroyed some property. And I guess it was the final straw or something.

Amy Donaldson: Evan didn't know exactly why Jorge was fired. He told police in an interview that Jorge occasionally did irresponsible things, like driving the dealership cars too fast, but overall, he seemed like a good worker.

Evan Smith: We valued him as an employee because he was quick. He was a hard worker and he was smart. He knew how to get things done, and he seemed to know how the parts went really well right off the bat. We were kind of sorry to see him go.

Keith Stevens: Did he seem to be mentally ill, in your opinion at all? I mean, was he functional? Was he literate? Did he express, I don't know, normal ideals?

Evan Smith: Well, it's hard to say because, you know, I've met a lot of people like George at his age, you know. And I was a little bit like George at his age, not to the extremes that he went to, but a lot of similarities.

Amy Donaldson: Jorge told Evan that his parents had problems and had been through a divorce. Jorge confided that he wasn't getting along well with his sister, but Evan admitted he didn't really know the details.

Evan Smith: I never knew the full story on anything, you know, I really didn't ask that. That was personal information, you know.

Keith Stevens: But there was nothing that really alarmed you?

Evan Smith: Nothing that really stood out to me. No red flags, you know, just kind of the average average guy, you know.

Keith Stevens: Anything else you can think of about your relationship with George that I haven't asked you?

Evan Smith: Well, the last week or so there before he left, he seemed to be finalizing everything. He closed his bank account. He closed out his apartment

Amy Donaldson: Evan said Jorge began selling or giving away all of his things.

Evan Smith: He was selling all his stuff, gave everything that he had to his sister and tried to sell his truck.

Keith Stevens: Did he ever express to you an ideation to kill himself? Suicide?

Evan Smith : It never seemed like he was suicidal. I mean, he showed some of the traits - get rid of everything you have...

Keith Stevens: That was only during that one week time span?

Evan Smith: Only during that one week.

Keith Stevens: Okay, did he seem to be depressed a lot?

Evan Smith: Seemed to be angry a lot which kind of worried me because I just just got him a gun and then all of a sudden he's angry all the time.

Keith Stevens: And what was he angry about?

Evan Smith: Never really said.

Keith Stevens: You just felt that there was some type of...

Evan Smith: You know, he just kind of had a different personality. And, you know, it kind of worried me for a while there, not only because now he was armed, but because he was leaving. And he kind of had it set in his mind that he was gone. And he was going to burn all his bridges to the ground before he left.

Amy Donaldson: Tom and his wife were in bed watching the news the night of Aug. 28, 1996. The phone rang, but they let their answering machine pick it up. Then they heard Jorge's voice.

Tom Watson: We picked up on the call because he said it was very important, that he had done something... bad.

Keith Stevens: So you're in your house, the telephone rings, you just let the machine pick it up. And you can hear the caller's voice on the other end of the phone asking you to pick up the phone?

Tom Watson: Yes, and my wife picked up the phone.

Amy Donaldson: But once Jorge started talking, she handed the phone to Tom.

Tom Watson: Tom, he said, I've really done somethin' stupid, and I said, what do you mean? He said, I've killed two people. At the time, he thought both the people were dead. And I said, What do you mean, you killed two people? And it really shocked me. My wife said all the color drained out of my face and everything. And I said, George, you did what? He said, Well, you'll see it on the news shortly. He said if you're watching the news, he said he'll definitely be on the news. He says, I killed them up at Dell reservoir.

Amy Donaldson: Jorge asked Tom to meet him near the south end of the Salt Lake Valley. He gave an address about 16 miles south of Jorge's apartment, just off the freeway. Tom told Jorge he couldn't meet him until 9 a.m. because he had company.

Tom Watson: And he says, I think your phone is being tapped. He said, so I'm gonna hang up now, and he just hung up.

Amy Donaldson: After Jorge hung up, Tom called police.

At this point, detectives were spread out working many different leads in the case. Some were still up at Little Dell, some waited at his apartment, while others talked with his sister. Dispatch put out the word that Tom had talked to Jorge.

(DISPATCH TAPE)

Dispatch: "I've received a phone call from a potential witness that the suspect has called and talked to them. I need to give that information to somebody right away."

Amy Donaldson: At this point, dispatchers alerted all law enforcement agencies in the valley who they were looking for and what they thought he was driving.

Dispatch: Suspect vehicle black Bronco, unknown plate, suspect is a Jorge Benvenuto, male, white 19 years of age, 5'11", 140, brown and brown, break.

Amy Donaldson: An hour later - at 1:10 a.m., officers found the abandoned Bronco in the parking lot of a car dealership in the area where Jorge asked Tom to meet him.

An officer felt the hood of the vehicle and realized it was still warm, indicating it hadn't been parked very long.

K-9 units were sent to the area, where they tried to track down Jorge, but they found nothing.

The next day, at 9 a.m., police went to the location where Tom had told Jorge they'd meet, and they waited for an hour. No one showed up.

About 10 p.m. that night, August 29th, Jorge called Tom again.

He told him that he'd walked to a gas station in American Fork, a city another 16 miles south from where the Bronco was found and that he needed money. Meanwhile, someone called police to report a suspicious person outside the gas station and local police responded to question the man. Once they learned who he was, they notified the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office.

It was Keith's boss, Sgt. Jerry Townsend, who drove to the police station, where he found a thin young man wearing shorts, his legs covered in dust from his long walk. Townsend put Jorge Benvenuto in handcuffs and led him to an unmarked police car.

After the break, the police question Jorge.

(BREAK)

Amy Donaldson: From the passenger seat of Townsend's unmarked police car, Jorge asked, "How long did it take you guys to find the people I shot?"

The sergeant, who passed away in 2018, detailed the conversation they had during the 30-minute car ride in a police report.

Townsend said he told Jorge that Yvette had climbed to the road and summoned help almost right away.

"You mean the girl isn't dead?" Jorge asked.

And when told that she was in the hospital, Jorge responded with shock. "I can't believe she's not dead," he reportedly said. "I wish she would have died so she didn't have to suffer."

Then Jorge asked if he thought he'd get the death penalty for what he'd done. Jorge said he wanted to die, and that he'd wanted to die for quite some time but he didn't have the guts to do it.

Sgt. Townsend took Jorge to an office at the Salt Lake County Justice Center where Keith Stevens and another detective Kris Ownby waited for him.

Dressed in a white t-shirt and blue basketball shorts, Jorge sat at a table facing a camera that recorded the 15-minute interview. The shirt is large and hangs on his thin frame and his hands are cuffed to a chain that encircles his waist. It causes him to lean forward slightly. Behind him is a large blank whiteboard with erasers. It looks more like a small classroom than a place where one might interrogate a murder suspect.

Detective Keith Stevens started by telling him that this would be his only opportunity to speak for himself.

Jorge mumbled he didn't care what other people thought. Detective Stevens acknowledged that, but then said he had to read something to him.

Keith Stevens: I have to read this to you OK?

Amy Donaldson: It was his Miranda rights...

Keith Stevens: Well let me read it to you OK? You have the right to remain silent....

Amy Donaldson: He quickly let Jorge know he had the right to remain silent, that anything he said could be used against him, and that he had the right to an attorney. But almost before Detective Stevens can finish, Jorge started confessing.

Jorge Benvenuto: What it basically boils down to is I'm tired of living and I don't want to breathe anymore and...

Keith Stevens: You're tired of living?

Jorge Benvenuto: Yeah

Amy Donaldson: Sometimes it's hard to understand what Jorge is saying in this audio, so I'll try to clarify it. In these first few minutes, he repeats that he had never had the desire to kill anybody but himself.

Jorge Benvenuto: That was in the heat of the moment thing.

Keith Stevens: Okay, that's just something boiled up inside of you or...

Jorge Benvenuto: It's building up, it's been building up for a while

Keith Stevens: It has been, you've had a desire inside you?

Jorge Benvenuto: No, I don't have any desire to kill anybody, I don't have any desire to kill anybody.

Keith Stevens: Tell me what's been going on inside you.

Jorge Benvenuto: I'm basically just tired of living...

Amy Donaldson: When asked what is, that he'd been feeling that led him to want to end his own life, he said "I'm basically just tired of living."

Keith Stevens: When you were up there. Were you actually looking for somebody? Or did they just come across to you and then that's what triggered you to do this?

Jorge Benvenuto: I wasn't looking for anybody.

Amy Donaldson: "I wasn't looking for anybody", Jorge said,

Jorge Benvenuto: I was driving around listening to the radio...

Amy Donaldson: “I was driving around listening to the radio.

Jorge Benvenuto: see if I could muster enough nerve to do me in.

Amy Donaldson: “seeing if I could muster enough nerve to do me in.”

Keith Stevens: So that was your intention, to go up there and kill yourself?

Jorge Benvenuto: Yeah..

Amy Donaldson: And when Detective Stevens asks if murder was a way he could get the state to end his life, he basically said yes.

Keith Stevens:

You figured this would be a mechanism that would help you so you wouldn't have to...

Jorge Benvenuto:

In a way. Maybe I'm just too chicken[BEEP] to do it myself.

Amy Donaldson: “In a way maybe I'm just too chicken[BEEP] to do it myself.”

Keith Stevens: Do you remember shooting those two people?

Jorge Benvenuto: Yeah, I remember. I stood there and watched and said okay wait a minute can we rewind that...

Amy Donaldson: I remember, Jorge said, I stood there and watched and said, ok, wait a minute. Can we rewind that and do it a little bit differently? Detective Stevens interrupts him.

Keith Stevens: You didn't like it the way it turned out, is that what you're telling me?

Jorge Benvenuto: I didn't - I just, I don't know. It's going to sound stupid to say I didn't mean to do it, I didn't mean to pump eight rounds...

Amy Donaldson: It's going to sound stupid to say I didn't mean to pump eight rounds into a couple of kids taking pictures. That's what he tells Detective Stevens.

Jorge Benvenuto: I didn't really mean to do it...

Amy Donaldson: And then he adds, I didn't really mean to do it. But it happened, you know. I don't know what came over me.

Keith Stevens: Did you reload the gun?

Jorge Benvenuto: I reloaded the gun because first of all...

Amy Donaldson: This girl must be going through hell, he said. That's why he reloaded to end her suffering.

Keith Stevens: Did she at one point stop screaming?

Jorge Benvenuto: She stopped screaming.

Amy Donaldson: And then he tells Detective Stevens he doesn't want to spend his life behind bars. He wants the death penalty.

Jorge Benvenuto: Give me the death penalty. I deserve it.

Amy Donaldson: Jorge repeatedly asked for the death penalty. "I deserve it," he said. He looked at the two detectives in the room. "You both know I deserve it."

Jorge Benvenuto: The whole thing is really stupid...

Amy Donaldson: "If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't do it like that," Jorge said.

Jorge Benvenuto: I'd leave them alone, let them live their life

Amy Donaldson: "I'd leave them alone, let them live their life"

Jorge Benvenuto: and just take mine.

Amy Donaldson: "and just take mine."

Amy Donaldson: Detective Stevens got his confession. But he didn't get any satisfying answers as to why Jorge shot two strangers instead of himself. When Sergeant Jim Potter, the spokesman for the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office addressed reporters the day after the arrest, he didn't share any of the details from the police interview.

(KSL TV NEWS CLIP)

Jim Potter: "He says he was there. He says that he did this, and he's shown no remorse for that."

Amy Donaldson: The public, including the Snarrs and Yvette and her family, would never see or hear that interview where Jorge made his confession. Police rarely share recordings of

interviews with anyone outside the investigation, except prosecutors and defense attorneys. But that meant they never got to judge his explanation for themselves. And because he never spoke to the media or in court. They never heard from Jorge about why he was wandering in the mountains with a gun.

(music)

Within a week of his arrest, Jorge was assigned a team from the Salt Lake County Legal Defenders Office to represent him in court. On that team was Mark Moffat - then a young lawyer.

In 1996, Mark represented people who couldn't afford to hire an attorney on their own.

Now he's a founding member of his own law firm in a one-story building on a busy street in the northwest end of Salt Lake City.

After more than two decades of defense work, representing hundreds of people, Jorge Benvenuto's case is one that stuck with him. What stands out to him all these years later is how much he didn't know about Jorge.

Mark Moffat: Let me just tell you this, I mean, the passage of time can erode memories, and the one thing I remember is how little we knew.

Amy Donaldson: Mark knew that his client was born in Uruguay - ruled by a repressive authoritarian regime at the time. He had moved to New York when he was eight with his mother, escaping some sort of domestic violence situation. But when Mark tried to talk to Jorge in jail, he shared very little information.

Mark Moffat: At the time that we represented George, he was very, very young, incredibly depressed, incredibly suspicious. I'm not sure he trusted us. He was freaked out, in a system that he didn't know, in a system he didn't trust in a place that was not his own. He was in very, very many ways lost.

Amy Donaldson: Mark didn't know the details of Jorge's life. But even as an overworked public defender, he could tell the story that had taken shape in the public eye, that he was a cold-blooded killer who just wanted to watch someone die, that didn't square with the distraught young man that he'd been assigned to represent.

Mark Moffat: People were saying that this was just Mr. Benvenuto going up to get the thrill of killing somebody. That was never true.

Amy Donaldson: The family didn't share a lot of details with Jorge's attorneys, but clearly there was some deeply rooted trauma, and it extended all the way back to the earliest years of his childhood. A psychological evaluation confirmed that Jorge was depressed and suicidal, not just

at the time of the shooting, but for much of his adolescence, he felt isolated, angry, like an outcast.

Mark Moffat: When you look at what he then did, when he went up into the mountains, his description of that is kind of chilling in many ways. He went there with the intent to kill himself, and couldn't do it. He tried to take his life, he had the gun in his mouth, he held the gun to his head as he sort of walked around in this trail system up around the top of Emigration Canyon. And then Yvette and Zachary had the misfortune of encountering him, while he was in this horrific state where he's, he's suicidal, he's angry at himself, he's angry at the world. He's been attempting to take his own life, and then he lashes out in this horrific sort of way. This was not a situation where he was going up to use his gun to see what it was like to kill somebody. He had his gun with him because he was going to kill himself.

Amy Donaldson: Instead, he killed a young man he'd never met. And he nearly killed a young woman, who now faced a long, painful road to recovery.

Mark still had many questions about his client and what led up to this terrible crime, a mystery that he would attempt to unpack years later. But back then, Jorge was unwilling or unable to provide answers or insight. While Mark didn't believe it was a thrill kill, that was the way police, the public, and the victims' families made sense of it. And even if people agreed with Mark's view, would it change anything?

For a family who lost a son, and a wounded woman whose life was forever altered by trauma, did it really matter why?

Many people thought Jorge deserved the death penalty for his crimes and Jorge was one of them. Mark and the defense team found themselves in a fight their client didn't really want to win.

Next time on The Letter...

Sy: Kill him. I actually said that, because I thought he deserves to die. I wanted him to die.

Andrea Smardon: In this episode, we learned that Jorge wanted to end his own life before he decided to turn the gun on others. I'm producer Andrea Smardon, and for this week's bonus episode, Amy talks to a psychologist and professor about the nuances of suicidal thoughts and behavior. They explore the links between homicide and suicide, and why many of those who commit murder are also suicidal.

You can get ALL the bonus content by subscribing to Lemonada Premium. You can subscribe right now in the apple podcast app by clicking on our podcast logo and then click the subscribe button.

Amy Donaldson: The Letter is researched and reported by me, Amy Donaldson. It's written by myself and Andrea Smardon, who is also responsible for production and sound design. Mixing by Trent Sell.

Andrea Smardon: Special thanks to Nina Earnest, Becky Bruce, KellieAnn Halverson, Ryan Meeks, Josh Tilton, Ben Kuebrich and Dave Cawley.

Amy Donaldson: Main musical score composed by Allison Leyton-Brown.

Andrea Smardon: With KSL Podcasts executive producer Sheryl Worsley, for Lemonada media executive producers Jessica Cordova Kramer and Stephanie Wittels Wachs and executive producers Paul Anderson and Nick Panella with Workhouse Media.

Amy Donaldson: If you like our show, please give us a rating and review. It helps people find us. Follow us at theletterpodcast.com and on social @theletterpodcast.

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