

# Aaron Ybarra: An Analysis

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

Though Ybarra was reported in the media to be “white,” and though two police documents categorized him as “white,”<sup>1</sup> based on my research, this is wrong. Researching the family online revealed that Aaron’s paternal grandfather, Ambrosio Ybarra, was “the first Hispanic Mayor in the state of Washington.”<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that the family was from Mexico – Ambrosio was born in Edinburg, Texas, just north of the Mexican border, and his second marriage took place in Mexico. Prior to becoming mayor, he served in the United States Army during the Korean War.

Ybarra’s maternal grandfather, Sinforiano Flores Hipol, reportedly was born in the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> His brother (and perhaps Sinforiano, too) was born in “Bauang, La Union, Philippines,”<sup>4</sup> an area settled by Spanish missionaries in the 16th century. The family apparently was of Latino heritage, but lived in Asia for generations. Though I could not ascertain when the family came to this country, Sinforiano was married in the United States<sup>5</sup> to Marion Alwina Erlwein, who was born in Seattle; this was her second marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Though Ybarra’s paternal grandfather achieved some level of prominence, serving briefly as mayor, Ybarra’s father engaged in illegal financial transactions and struggled with alcoholism and depression. Ambrose Ybarra had five convictions for drunk driving, plus convictions for failure to obey an officer, driving with a suspended license, and violating the ignition interlock on his vehicle.<sup>7</sup> After his third DUI, he was incarcerated. When Ambrose was appointed to be in charge of a trust fund for his wife’s cousin, he spent over \$400,000 on himself before being removed from his position.

On 15 August 2013, Ambrose drank a fifth of whiskey and then cut his throat with a knife. Aaron found his father, who

told him that for several days he had wanted to “put a bullet in his head.”<sup>8</sup> Aaron called his sister, and she called the police. Ambrose survived the attempted suicide.

Aaron’s brother Joel is a year younger than him; Joel reportedly was addicted to heroin.<sup>9</sup> Online genealogy records indicate that Ybarra also has an older sister: Brandi Camille Ybarra.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to her father and brothers, she appears to be high achieving. Assuming there is not more than one Brandi Camille Ybarra, she received recognition in 2013 from the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC), which is an “international honor society” that recognizes “students dedicated to the study of nonprofit management, philanthropy, and social entrepreneurship/enterprise.”<sup>11</sup> Ybarra’s mother worked as an administrative services manager at Edmonds Community College from at least 2010 through 2013, and perhaps for many other years.<sup>12</sup>

## AARON YBARRA

Date: **5 June 2014**  
School: **Seattle Pacific University**  
Location: **Seattle, WA**  
Age: **26**  
Killed: **1**  
Wounded: **2**  
Outcome: **Prison (intended suicide)**  
Shooter population: **Aberrant adult**  
Psychological type: **Psychotic**  
Attack type: **Random (no specific targets)**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see “About the Site” at [schoolshooters.info](http://schoolshooters.info).

## AARON'S LIFE

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Information on Ybarra's childhood is scarce. He and his siblings reportedly were home-schooled.<sup>13</sup> In 2006, he attended Cyber-school, an online program run by the Edmonds School District, but he withdrew without receiving his diploma.<sup>14</sup>

He took some courses at Edmonds Community College,<sup>15</sup> the same college where his mother worked, though he apparently did not complete a degree. Ybarra reportedly took classes "from fall 2005 through spring 2010, and again in 2012."<sup>16</sup> Based on the available information, Ybarra failed to earn his high school diploma and also failed to earn a college degree. He did, however, earn "a certificate of completion in aerospace manufacturing through an online program."<sup>17</sup>

At some point he "tried his hand at writing his own screenplays"<sup>18</sup> but never achieved any success. He also wrote novels – "mostly adventure stories."<sup>19</sup> A woman who shared his interest in writing described him as follows: "Aaron was awesome; he was the nicest person – super-quiet, super-funny."<sup>20</sup>

Ybarra was skilled with firearms. He and his brother "shared a love of guns" and were competitive shooters.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Ybarra worked at a gun range for eight years.<sup>22</sup> The family kept firearms in the home, despite the suicidal episodes of both Aaron and his father.

Ybarra drank with his father, going to local bars together. Like his father, Aaron struggled with alcoholism and depression. In 2010, Ybarra called 911 – he was drunk and reported both suicidal and homicidal thoughts. He said he had "a rage" inside him and wanted to hurt himself and others.<sup>23</sup> He was involuntarily committed to a hospital. Two years later, a passerby called the police after finding Ybarra drunk and lying in a street. Ybarra said he wanted a SWAT team to get him and "make him famous." He said, "no one cares about him." He was again involuntarily committed.<sup>24</sup> Like his father, Ybarra had also been arrested for drunk driving, as well as driving without insurance.<sup>25</sup>

Ybarra's substance abuse was severe enough that he spent seven days in a detox program, and then received treatment with a chemical-dependency counselor and other service providers.<sup>26</sup> He reported having used "marijuana, cocaine, and amphetamines."<sup>27</sup> After his attack, he told the police that he had been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and transient psychosis, and had been taking Prozac (an antidepressant) and Risperdal (an antipsychotic).<sup>28</sup> He reportedly had significant mental health issues as a child, including OCD, but the only detail I have seen of this was related to the arrangement of his bedroom furniture: "after his parents changed the furniture in his room, he became overcome with feelings of hatred."<sup>29</sup> Ybarra commented that at some point his compulsions went from good to evil.

In his journal, Ybarra stated, "Ever since I took the medication I became more calm, more patient and more confident."<sup>30</sup> Eventually, however, he did not want to feel calm and patient. He told the police that he stopped taking the medication because he "wanted to feel his hate."<sup>31</sup>

Ybarra's attack was driven by a generalized hatred: "I felt nothing but hate – 100 percent hatred – towards the world, towards everyone."<sup>32</sup> Prior to the attack, Ybarra took a campus tour of the university, and then visited it again the day before his rampage to ascertain if people would be on campus at the time he intended to attack.<sup>33</sup>

The day of his attack, Ybarra wrote:

This is it! I can't believe I'm finally doing this! So exciting I'm jumpy. Since Virginia Tech and Columbine, I've been thinking about these a lot. I use to feel bad for the ones who were killed, but now Eric Harris and Seung Hui Cho became my Idols. And they guided me til today.<sup>34</sup>

Harris and Cho didn't simply guide him by their actions. After the attack, he stated that he could hear their voices talking to him.<sup>35</sup> He said that Harris's voice had been "telling him to hurt people."<sup>36</sup> According to the police, Ybarra actually made a pilgrimage to Columbine High School.<sup>37</sup>

During the attack, Ybarra was enraged when people he approached did not take him seriously. One student thought the gun was fake and laughed. Ybarra later admitted, "I was really mad at him for doing that . . . That was the first guy I shot."<sup>38</sup> He wanted people to respect him, and when they didn't, he shot them.

Despite his heavy substance abuse, Ybarra said he was clean and sober the day of his attack.<sup>39</sup> In addition, he had a knife with him and he reported to the police that, "he was going to use that to cut his throat after the shooting."<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, his father had attempted suicide by cutting his throat less than a year earlier.

Though Ybarra committed a random attack against strangers, his journal reveals that he had wanted revenge against specific people: "the shit-talkers at the Getaway [Tavern]," and "the junky who robbed our house."<sup>41</sup> Thus, his original intention was not to commit a school shooting. Even after deciding to attack an educational setting, his first thought was to target Washington State University or other schools, but logistically it was easier to get to Seattle Pacific. He had no grievance with the university; he simply chose it as a convenient target.

## COMMENTS

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Aaron Ybarra was an aberrant adult shooter, meaning he attacked an institution with which he had no recent or current connection, i.e., had never been a student or employee of Seattle Pacific University. Among the sample of 48 shooters I discuss in my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, I found that white male shooters predominated among secondary school shooters, but non-white-males constituted the majority among college and aberrant adult shooters. Though Ybarra fits this pattern, the possible significance of his cultural heritage is unknown. Whereas other aberrant adult shooters expressed discomfort with their cultural

identities (e.g., Bruco Eastwood and Marc Lépine), I have seen no such indication for Ybarra. Also, whereas other non-white shooters were immigrants to the USA or Canada and thus faced multiple challenges associated with acculturation, Ybarra was not an immigrant.

Most aberrant adult shooters fall into one of three groups: those who attacked elementary or middle schools they never attended; those who attacked elementary or middle schools they attended many years prior; or those who attacked colleges or universities they never attended. Ybarra falls into the latter category, and like others in this category (Marc Lépine, Jillian Robbins, Kimveer Gill, and Elliot Rodger), he was within the age range of traditional undergraduate or graduate students. All of these shooters committed their attacks between the ages of 19 and 26. In *School Shooters* I speculate that one of the motives in these attacks was envy – envy of those who were succeeding where the perpetrators had failed. Also like Robbins and Gill, Ybarra had a parent who worked in higher education, which may have exacerbated his sense of failure.

I categorize Ybarra as a psychotic shooter because he heard the voices of Eric Harris and Seung Hui Cho talking to him. Like many psychotic shooters, he appears to have had a high functioning older sibling. Assuming I have correctly identified his sister as the one who was recognized by NACC in 2013, then she was achieving at a high level academically and was honored just a year before Ybarra's attack. Like most school shooters, Ybarra experienced school-related failures, and his sister's academic success may have made him feel his high school and college failures more intensely. Like many psychotic shooters, he may have grown up in the shadow a higher-functioning sibling.

Ybarra resembled many school shooters in other ways, too. He had at least one family member who served in the military (his paternal grandfather), grew up in a household where firearms had a prominent place, had a history of substance abuse, had multiple run-ins with the police, and was depressed and suicidal. He also had role models for his rampage in the figures of Eric Harris and Seung Hui Cho. Such role models are seen most commonly among psychotic shooters. Assuming the report that Ybarra visited Columbine High School is accurate (I only found it in one source), he would not be the first psychotic shooter to engage in such an act. Alvaro Castillo made a pilgrimage to Columbine, and a Finnish shooter, Matti Saari, made a pilgrimage to the site of a prior school shooting in Finland.

Though I categorize Ybarra as a psychotic shooter because of his auditory hallucinations, his family life was more problematic than that of most psychotic shooters who often come from essentially stable backgrounds. Ybarra's father had significant problems with alcohol, had multiple arrests, and made a dramatic suicide attempt less than a year before Ybarra's attack, and Ybarra's brother was a heroin addict. This history is akin to the family lives of traumatized shooters. Despite the father's instability, there is no indication that Aaron was an abused or traumatized child. His father's problem drinking, however, went back at least as far as 1985 when he received his first DUI, which

was before Aaron was even born.<sup>42</sup> If information surfaces indicating childhood abuse, then Ybarra would be categorized as both traumatized and psychotic.

This combination of features has been seen in other shooters. For example, I categorize James Wilson as both a traumatized shooter and a psychotic shooter. Other perpetrators, such as Marc Lépine and Alvaro Castillo, I categorize as primarily psychotic with a possible secondary categorization as traumatized.

As noted above, Ybarra stated in his journal that the psychiatric medications helped him feel better. He deliberately stopped taking them because he wanted to feel hatred. Other shooters have reported being helped by psychiatric medications, including Kip Kinkel, Jason Hoffman, and Eric Hainstock.<sup>43</sup> Though psychiatric medications have been blamed for causing school shootings, there has been little attention to the fact that some shooters have benefitted from them. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see my article "Psychiatric Medications and School Shooters" ([www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info)).

Ybarra tried his hand with writing screenplays and novels; how much his failure to achieve anything with his writing affected him remains unknown. Other shooters, such as Kimveer Gill and Seung Hui Cho, have had literary aspirations that did not pan out.

Many school shooters had romantic failures or rejections that fueled their depression and rage. I have found no reference to Ybarra having had an intimate relationship or expressing frustration related to this issue. If he had never had an intimate partner, this may have been a significant factor in his frustration.

School shootings are complex phenomena that are caused by a multiplicity of factors. In the case of Aaron Ybarra, there were many stressors: an alcoholic and suicidal father, a heroin-addicted brother, a successful older sibling, long-term mental health issues including reported OCD and psychotic symptoms, substance abuse, legal troubles, failure to complete high school, failure to complete college, failure as a writer, and apparent failure in the realms of dating, love, and sex. His generalized hatred toward the world was supported by the role models he chose (Eric Harris and Seung Hui Cho). His life seemed so bleak that he wanted to die, but not without unleashing his rage against random people.

## NOTES

- 1 "Ybarra Mental Health 2010" and "Ybarra Mental Health 2012," both available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).
- 2 <http://www.dailysunnews.com/news/2006/oct/27/obituaries/>.
- 3 <http://www.ancestry.com>.
- 4 <http://www.geni.com/profile/600000000908743399/events/600000000895430176>.
- 5 <http://www.ancestry.com>.
- 6 <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~daleschultz/dale/15923.htm>.
- 7 Caitlin Cruz and Mike Baker, "SPU Shooting Suspect Raised in

- Home of Tumult,” *Seattle Times*, July 19, 2014.
- 8 “Ambrose Ybarra Mental Health 2013.” Available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).
  - 9 Cruz and Baker, “SPU Shooting Suspect.”
  - 10 <http://www.ancestry.com>.
  - 11 [http://www.urban.csuohio.edu/nacc/documents/2013Spring\\_Inductees.pdf](http://www.urban.csuohio.edu/nacc/documents/2013Spring_Inductees.pdf).
  - 12 [http://data.spokesman.com/salaries/state/2012/job-titles/browse/?job\\_title=Administrative%20Services%20Manager%20B](http://data.spokesman.com/salaries/state/2012/job-titles/browse/?job_title=Administrative%20Services%20Manager%20B).
  - 13 “Suspect in Seattle Pacific Killing had Well-Documented Demons,” *Seattle Times*, June 9, 2014.
  - 14 Rikki King and Eric Stevick, “SPU Shootings Suspect Sought Fame Through Violence,” *The Herald* (Everett, Washington), June 6, 2014.
  - 15 “Suspect in Seattle.”
  - 16 King and Stevick, “SPU Shootings.”
  - 17 King and Stevick, “SPU Shootings.”
  - 18 “Suspect in Seattle.”
  - 19 Andy Campbell, “‘Hellbent’ Seattle Pacific University Shooter Aaron Ybarra Obsessed with Columbine: Cops,” *Huffington Post*, June 6, 2014.
  - 20 “Suspect in Seattle.”
  - 21 Cruz and Baker, “SPU Shooting Suspect.”
  - 22 “Suspect in Seattle.”
  - 23 “Ybarra Mental Health 2010.” Available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).
  - 24 “Ybarra Mental Health 2012.” Available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).
  - 25 Howard Koplowitz, “Who is Aaron Ybarra? Suspected Seattle Pacific University Shooter Obsessed with Columbine,” *International Business Times*, June 6, 2014.
  - 26 Cruz and Baker, “SPU Shooting Suspect.”
  - 27 Cruz and Baker, “SPU Shooting Suspect.”
  - 28 “Washington v. Ybarra 2014,” p. 6. Available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).
  - 29 Oliver O’Connell, “Psychotic Seattle Campus Killer Confessed that Shooting His First Victim Was ‘So Fun,’” *Daily Mail* (UK), December 11, 2014.
  - 30 “Aaron Ybarra’s Journal,” p. 3. Available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).
  - 31 “Washington v. Ybarra,” p. 6.
  - 32 Neal Karlinsky, “Accused Seattle Campus Killer Allegedly Confessed How It Was ‘So Fun,’” *ABC News*, December 10, 2014.
  - 33 “Washington v. Ybarra 2014,” p. 5.
  - 34 “Ybarra’s Journal,” p. 6.
  - 35 Lewis Kamb, “In Newly Released Video, SPU Shooter Details How and Why He Targeted Campus,” *Seattle Times*, December 9, 2014.
  - 36 “Suspect in Seattle.”
  - 37 Howard Koplowitz, “Who is Aaron Ybarra?,” *International Business Times*, June 6, 2014.
  - 38 Kamb, “In Newly Released Video.”
  - 39 “Washington v. Ybarra 2014,” p. 6.
  - 40 “Washington v. Ybarra 2014,” p. 5.
  - 41 “Ybarra’s Journal,” p. 4.
  - 42 Cruz and Baker, “SPU Shooting Suspect.”
  - 43 Peter Langman, “Psychiatric Medications and School Shooters,” 2013. Available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).